Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Territories
3. Prologue
4. Chapter 1
5. Chapter 2
6. Chapter 3
7. Chapter 4
8. Chapter 5
9. Chapter 6
10. Chapter 7
11. Chapter 8
12. Chapter 9
13. Chapter 10
14. Chapter 11
15. Chapter 12
16. Chapter 13
17. Chapter 14
18. Chapter 15
19. Chapter 16
20. Chapter 17
21. Chapter 18
22. Chapter 19
23. Chapter 20
24. Chapter 21

Allegiances

[image]

EMERALDCLAN

LEADER

Sleetstar- a grey tom with white flecks on his back and legs and green eyes

DEPUTY

Flameclaw- a ginger tom with a darker muzzle and underbelly, a darker tipped tail, and amber eyes

MEDICINE CAT

Moonbeam- a silvery tom with broad shoulders and ice blue eyes

Apprentice, Cloudpaw

WARRIORS

Oneclaw- a brown tom with three white paws, one white ear, and has ice blue eyes

Sunpelt- a ginger tom with a white patch on his back, one white forepaw, and amber eyes

Charfur- a grey tom with startling green eyes

Snaketail- a brown tabby tom with a long white tipped tail and yellow eyes

Apprentice, Meltpaw

Badgerclaw- a black and brown tom with long claws and dark brown eyes

Littletail- a black tom with a short tail and amber eyes

Apprentice, Mistpaw

Lizardbelly- a white she-cat with black stripes on her back and legs, lighter black spots on her belly, and green eyes

Specklepelt- a light grey she-cat with white paws and chest and yellow eyes

Robintalon- a light ginger she-cat with dark ginger paws and green eyes

Rainwhisker- a sandy tabby tom with white forelegs, white splashes on his back like rain, and bright blue eyes

APPRENTICES

Meltpaw- a blue grey she-cat with a darker muzzle and bright blue eyes

Mistpaw- a light grey she-cat with darker patches and blue eyes

Cloudpaw- a small white fluffy she-cat with a black tipped tail and green eyes

QUEENS

Starnose- a beautiful light brown she-cat with a white star shaped patch on her nose, and bright blue eyes (mother of Flowerkit, a cream coloured she-cat with black front paws and blue eyes)

Yellowleaf- a peach coloured she-cat with orange stripes on her face and yellow eyes (mother of Snowkit, a white tom with ginger patches and amber eyes, and Emberkit, an all white she-cat with four ginger paws and yellow eyes)

ELDERS

Whitemoss- a white she-cat with one black patch on her back and green eyes

Stiffwhisker- a dark tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Swiftear- a golden tom with a white muzzle, chest, and tail and green eyes

SAPPHIRECLAN

LEADER

Tawnystar- a tawny coloured she-cat with orange ears and amber eyes

DEPUTY

Watershine- a blue grey she-cat with white paws and green eyes

Apprentice, Talonpaw

MEDICINE CAT

Wavepelt- a silver tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Rainpelt- a blue grey tom with a white tipped tail and amber eyes

WARRIORS

Tigerleap- a dark tabby tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Honeypaw

Snowclaw- a white tom with a grey muzzle and green eyes

Sunfire- a golden she-cat with blue eyes

Foxfur- a red-brown tom with a white tipped tail and paws, and yellow eyes

Cindertail- a grey tom with a darker tail and dark blue eyes

Apprentice, Barkpaw

Pinetail- a dark ginger tom with long fur and yellow eyes

Kestrelfur- a dark brown she-cat with blue eyes

Oakwhisker- a dark tabby tom with white forepaws and yellow eyes

Apprentice, Petalpaw

Crumblerock- a grey tom with a red tint to his fur and amber eyes

APPRENTICES

Barkpaw- a brown tom with darker patches and amber eyes

Talonpaw- a brown tabby tom with black paws and amber eyes

Petalpaw- a black she-cat with cream patches and yellow eyes

Honeypaw- a light golden she-cat with a grey chest and paws and amber eyes

QUEENS

Jayfoot- a blue grey she-cat with a darker tail and paws and yellow eyes (mother of Dovekit, a light grey she-cat with white paws and chest and amber eyes, and Willowkit, a dark grey she-cat with darker stripes and yellow eyes)

Sandbreeze- a tawny she-cat with black paws and green eyes (mother of Featherkit, a calico she-cat with a black tail and green eyes)

ELDERS

Scarpelt- a dark tabby tom with many scars and yellow eyes

Mothwhisker- a light tabby she-cat with white paws and green eyes

Blue-eye- a black tom with four white paws and brilliant blue eyes

RUBYCLAN

LEADER

Wingstar- a white she-cat with a brown striped tail and amber eyes

DEPUTY

Foxpath- a dark ginger tom with long claws and green eyes

MEDICINE CAT

Torrentstep- a blue grey tom with darker wave-like stripes, long fur, and blue eyes

WARRIORS

Crispleaf- a light brown she-cat with darker stripes and amber eyes

Apprentice, Shadowpaw

Streamclaw- a grey she-cat with a darker stripe down her back and yellow eyes

Mountainfur- a dark grey tom with yellow eyes

Thunderpelt- a black tom with a white stripe down his back like lightning and amber eyes

Brushfur- a dark brown tom with long fur and green eyes

Apprentice, Hazelpaw

Stormeyes- a white tom with light brown patches and deep blue eyes

Morningfrost- a light grey she-cat, almost white, with ice blue eyes

Snakefur- a grey she-cat with darker diamond shaped spots on her back and light blue eyes

Daisypetal- a light grey she-cat with white paws and blue eyes

Snowshadow- a grey-blue tom the same colour as shadows on fresh snow, with amber eyes

Batflight- a dark grey she-cat with a white muzzle and blue eyes

Fawnpelt- a light brown she-cat with white spots on her lower back and yellow eyes

Oakfall- a brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Hawkpaw

APPRENTICES

Birdpaw- a light brown she-cat with white markings and amber eyes

Hazelpaw- a light brown she-cat with darker stripes and yellow eyes

Hawkpaw- a small dark grey tom with yellow eyes

Shadowpaw- a black she-cat lighter grey accents and yellow eyes

QUEENS

Owlwing- a calico she-cat with long fur and blue eyes (mother to Spottedkit, a brown tabby she-cat with a white spotted tail and amber eyes)

ELDERS

Whitepelt- a white she-cat with a grey splashed pelt and green eyes

Smallfoot- a black and white tom with small paws and amber eyes

Territories

The Territories

This story takes place in the Canadian wilderness. The clans live on the East side of a small inland lake and to the Southwest of the Canadian Shield. The Canadian Shield is a large area of exposed rocks that form the ancient geological core of the North American continent. Basically it's a long mountain range, but it's not quite high enough to be considered mountains. While there are high peaks and low valleys, I would consider most of it pretty much the same general height. The terrain on and around the Canadian Shield is rocky, with dry soil, towering evergreen trees, as well as stubby undergrowth. It is not all like that, however. There are areas that are lush and green, full of deciduous trees that are old and covered in moss, areas with rivers that flow quickly, waterfalls, and swamps. It all depends on the sun (South facing areas receive more sunlight and will most likely be drier), and the drainage in each area. The cats in these clans don't explore the Canadian Shield too much (in this story they call it the Rocky Hills), as it is mostly bare of vegetation in this area where they live, and most of the rocks are too big and sharp to climb. There are a few rivers that run down from the Rocky Hills and into the small lake, creating a lush area of vegetation in between where the cats live. The area is filled with both coniferous and deciduous trees, lots of undergrowth and small plants, as well as some open fields. There is a human hiking trail, which the clan cats call the Twoleg Footpath. It was once a small dirt road that used to lead to a hunt camp nearby. The hunt camp is now desolate and collapsing from age and weather. This is the only place where catmint grows, and since it is located just North of SapphireClan territory, they usually try to steak their claim on it, and defend it as if it were their own. The Twoleg Footpath is what the clan cats use to split their territories. It begins in the Rocky Hills and travels straight West towards the lake. At the end of this trail is

a small broken dock (used to be used for loading and unloading boats and canoes). This is the path the borders all of EmeraldClan from the other two clans. About halfway between the Rocky Hills and the lake, another trail splits off in a Northbound direction. This is the path that leads to the old hunting cabin, and it is also the path that separates SapphireClan and RubyClan. Occasionally humans bring their dogs down these paths, but not often enough that they cause a lot of trouble. In the human world, they would have to drive their cars down the highway and turn off down a dirt road to park their car. From there they can walk and reach the hiking trails. The area has grown in a lot since the past when it was used often (before any living cat remembers), so most humans wouldn't bother to come here. For further information, I will split up the three territories and describe them individually.

[image]

EmeraldClan

This is the main clan in this story. Their territory is the furthest South; the Twoleg Footpath to the North separates them from the other two territories. This area is filled with both types of trees. More coniferous trees begin to grow as you travel Northward (toward RubyClan). The Rocky Hills border their territory to the East and Southeast, and in this area there are a lot of deciduous trees, effectively blotting out most of the sunlight. There is an extreme amount of undergrowth; what is normal for a Canadian forest. Except under the coniferous trees closer to the RubyClan border. There is an exceptionally less amount of undergrowth here; the ground is covered with needles and the EmeraldClan cats feel more nervous in this area of their territory. To the Northwest lies the lake and SapphireClan territory. To the West is wide-open marshland, with tall grasses and small spindly trees. Here there are occasionally moose and small birds, but EmeraldClan deems it too bare to make it a used hunting ground. Where the tree line ends and the marsh begins is where they draw their border. Only some cats hunt outside the border, but it doesn't entirely matter if they do or not because it's not technically anyone's territory. Because of the lack of a lot of sunlight and because of the amount of trees, these cats are good at climbing, as well as hunting and fighting at night.

They have long tails for balance and long claws for gripping the bark. Their paw pads are semi-rough from the bark on the trees. Their camp is located in a low gully, closer in direction to the Rocky Hills. An old stream used to run through here, so the centre is clear of most undergrowth. The cats keep it clean as well, by years of walking and by digging up any new sprouts that may get in the way of the clearing. It's sandy and dry in the centre (unless it rains, then it fills with deep puddles), with grassy slopes on either side. The camp is surrounded by a dense, low growing bramble wall that offers protection from enemies and weather. The entrance to the camp is at the deepest end of the gully (South end). There is a hill, called the Training Hill, where the apprentices train their battle moves and their tree climbing. The branches of nearby trees swoop down to the top of the hill so that cats can easily leap up into the branches. The hilltop is generally flat and large enough for cats to practice battling. Forget-me-nots bloom every year on the south facing side of the hill. The main source for fresh water is a medium sized stream that runs down from the Rocky Hills and into the marshland. It loops deep into their territory and a smaller stream branches off the main one, closer to their camp. The ground in their territory is mainly dry, but remains wet for a while after heavy rainfalls and when the snow melts because of the lack of sunshine. Snow also last longer in their territory than the others for the same reason.

Prey: voles, mice, shrews, small moles, blackbirds, chickadees, robins, other small birds, squirrels, chipmunks, grouse

SapphireClan

SapphireClan is located directly beside the lake. They are bordered by both of the Twoleg Footpaths and their territory is filled with mostly deciduous trees and open areas the closer you get to the lake. There is a large river that flows down from the Rocky Hills, through RubyClan, and into the lake on the Northern most area of their territory. It's too large to wade or jump across, so they must swim. Where the Twoleg Footpath that separates SapphireClan and RubyClan crosses the river, there is a twoleg bridge that cats are able to walk across. The ground around the river is rocky in some areas and marshy in others with rushes and marsh grasses growing

nearby. Their territory is filled with soft grasses and moss so their paw pads are generally pretty soft. They use the lake and the large stream to fish so they have thicker waxy pelts that the water beads off of. Their pelts are also good for the winter winds that blow off the lake. On the South end of their territory, near the border with EmeraldClan, there is an area of exposed rocks, which rise pretty high and require climbing to get to the top; they call it the Rocky Outcrop. The Rocky Outcrop ends a little ways into the lake and the surrounding area is pretty rocky from the waves beating at it and crumbling it. It offers their camp protection from the cold winds that blow off the lake. Most of the cats don't bother with the Rocky Outcrop; even though the black rocks are very warm in the sun, they're mostly too sharp and pointy to lie comfortably on. Their camp is located just East of the Rocky Outcrop and is surrounded by old leafy trees. They don't have a barrier per say, but their camp is well hidden and surrounded by marshy land. It is slightly more raised than the surrounding marsh, keeping their camp dry, and it is concealed by thick trees and bushes. There are only a few ways into their camp through the marshland, which also makes it hard for invasion. The area where the apprentices train is right next to the lake on a dry and sandy patch of earth. They call it the Sandy Beach. It's in between the Rocky Outcrop and the large stream and covers the whole land next to the lake. There is driftwood that occasionally washes up so it's part of the apprentices' chores to clean the Sandy Beach. The area around the Sandy Beach is pretty bare, with lots of small bushes and grasses growing up. It was once filled with trees like the rest of their territory, but not terribly long ago they had trouble with beavers. The beavers had come and chewed down a lot of their trees, leaving pointy stumps in their place. Not being able to fight them, the cats of SapphireClan had to basically leave them alone and they had to be very careful around them. This lead to a period of time when the cats went hungry as they weren't able to fish with so many beavers around. Eventually the cats had enough and called EmeraldClan to help. The beavers now live on the other side of the lake and don't bother the clan cats. North of their territory lies the old twoleg den (hunting cabin). It's falling apart, the roof and walls are deteriorating, and it's covered in moss. Near the base of the walls is where the catmint grows. The SapphireClan cats try to lay claim to this area and the catmint. They claim that it's on their land and that it's too hard for the other clans

to get to it. Many battles have been fought over this and the SapphireClan cats have sometimes been successful at using it as a bargaining chip. In the winter the stream and lake freeze, so these cats have a harder time trying to find as much prey as they're used to in the warmer months. They sometimes swim in the lake, but it's fairly deep and there is nowhere for a cat to rest. It's easier for them to swim in the stream, despite the current. They have strong back legs and large paws built for swimming.

Prey: voles, mice, shrews, blackbirds, chickadees, robins, sandpipers, small ducks, small fish, and the occasional big fish like salmon or lake trout.

RubyClan

RubyClan is bordered by the Twoleg Footpath to the South, as well as to the West, bordered by the Rocky Hills on the East and Northeast, and by the river to the North. The river in the North is the one that runs from the Rocky Hills, through their territory and SapphireClan's and into the lake. This stream curves pretty deeply into their territory before it exits it and lush greenery grows beside the stream. This is where they gather a lot of the herbs they need. Their territory is comprised of a lot of coniferous trees, a few deciduous, and a lot of grass and shrubs. It's pretty open in the centre of their territory like grassland, and near the outer edge of their borders there are a lot more trees. The ground is usually pretty dry and rocky with lots of sparse patches of bushes and grass. These cats are good at stalking and are very fast, making their hind legs strong and their bodies lean. They also live and hunt in the Rocky Hills pretty often and their paw pads are very rough from climbing on the rocks all the time. They have strong shoulders as well from climbing in the Rocky Hills; and despite the fact that they can climb, they'd rather climb rocks than trees. Their camp is located at the base of the Rocky Hills in a small hollow scooped out of the ground. Their camp is surrounded by scraggly bushes as well as small and large boulders, which is their protective barrier. Because their camp is located in a dip in the earth they have a disadvantage of being easily ambushed. Because of this, there is a guard posted constantly on a ledge high up in the rock wall. The entrance to their camp is between a large boulder and the wall of rock they live in on

the East side of their camp. It's protected and hidden by thorn and raspberry bushes. Around the outer edge of their camp a lot of wild flowers and thyme plants grow, so in the spring-time their camp is truly a beautiful sight. And it smells wonderful because of the thyme, however sometimes it masks the scent of predators, which isn't necessarily a good thing. The RubyClan cats train their apprentices in an area between their camp and the river. It's a sandy area surrounded by rocky outcrops and dense patches of ferns. The river water feeds the plants here and they grow in abundance.

Prey: voles, mice, shrews, blackbirds, robins, bigger birds like grouse, as well as the occasional large birds that nest in the Rocky Hills, like hawks and eagles, hares, and rabbits.

The Ravine

This is the place where the three clans meet and gather peacefully every full moon. It is a huge scar torn in the earth, and it's not visible until you get to the edge of it. The Ravine is hidden by rocks, trees, and shrubs. It is located at the edge of RubyClan territory; they graciously let others travel there every full moon, and every half-moon for the medicine cats. There are steps and ledges made of rock that allow generally easy access down to the bottom where the gatherings are held. The bottom of the Ravine is generally flat and open, and in the centre, a little more Northwards, there lies two large boulders where the leaders sit to address the clan cats. There is a larger boulder which can fit two leaders, and one slightly smaller that leans back against the larger boulder where the last leader can sit. The ground is bare, rocky, and sandy in some areas. On the East side of the Ravine there is a cave that is always guarded by the medicine cats. It's called the Star Cave and this is where the medicine cats meet every half-moon to share tongues with StarClan.

[image]

Star Cave

This is a large cave found in the Ravine where the medicine cats gather every half-moon. There is a main cave, which is tall, but not

very deep. From there, there are a couple tunnels that twist and turn deeper under ground. They were created from years and years of rainwater; it was originally an underwater cave system. At one time the Ravine was filled with water. There is one tunnel where a draft can be felt and this is the tunnel that leads to the Star Cave. Following this tunnel the cats come to a large cave, which is only lit slightly by a small hole in the roof. Here is where the moonlight and starlight is let in and it reflects off of a small pool of water, giving the cave a surreal feeling. The small pool is fed by water that drips down from the ceiling in a constant trickle. The medicine cats drink from this pool and are then able to speak with their ancestors. This is also where the new leaders come to receive their nine lives from StarClan. Because this tunnel and cave system leads East from the Ravine and under the ground, it is located deep beneath the earth in RubyClan territory. Although, in all the moons they have inhabited this area, no one has found the hole in the ground where the light shines down into the Star Cave. Most think it is impossible to find, and they have decided that StarClan has hidden it from them so as not to disturb the sacred grounds.

Prologue

A star shone brightly down from the indigo sky, just a little bit brighter than the rest. A silver cat was sitting in a forest clearing gazing up at the swath of twinkling lights above. His broad shoulders were hunched in anticipation, his fur fluffing up against a light breeze.

"Goodnight." A grey and white spotted tom spoke nearby. Glancing over his shoulder he saw the spotted cat climb up to his den in an old large maple tree. It grew at the edge of the clearing where he sat with thick branches that criss-crossed the sky.

"Goodnight Sleetstar," replied the silver tom softly. All was quiet in the camp, except for the sound of many cats sleeping soundly and crickets chirping in the surrounding forest. Leaves rustled gently over head.

The silver tom turned to stare at the stars again. He stifled a yawn. The tom was tired after a long day, but something was pulling his eyes towards the sky and he knew something was going to happen. His heart felt uneasy as he waited.

A warm new leaf breeze ruffled his pelt and he breathed in the sweet smell of growing things. It quickly grew stronger and stronger, whipping the emerald leaves above his head into a wild frenzy. He opened his eyes and gasped as the wind briefly tore the breath from his lungs.

A soft voice whispered in his ear, speaking above the wind.

"Beware Moonbeam. An ember blown carelessly in the breeze can engulf the whole forest in flame."

The silver tom stiffened in fear.

"What does that mean?" he called up into the air. "Guide me StarClan!"

"You will find out in time." A ghostly figure of a cat twinkled between the leaves of the old maple tree. Their fur was dusted with the stars and they seemed to glow from within.

"Breezesong," the tom whispered on a breath, his eyes shining. The glimmering StarClan cat smiled softly down at him. "It's been a long time," he sighed.

"I know my dear Moonbeam. I will find you again when you are in need of guidance, but for now I must depart." She nuzzled the top of his head briefly before she turned to leap up the tree branches and into the night.

"Wait!" he called after her, but she didn't turn. She didn't even twitch an ear, and Moonbeam felt disappointment wash through his heart. He missed his mother dearly.

The wind blew hard once again, whipping dead leaves and sand up off the ground and into the evening sky. He squinted his eyes against the sand. Then suddenly he saw a bright star appear as if engulfed in flame. The orange glow reflected in the cat's ice blue eyes. And as suddenly as it had been lit, it was out.

He let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. There was something wrong. He knew something bad was going to happen. The omen repeated over and over in his head and he shook out his fur.

He glanced up one last time, but the she-cat was nowhere to be seen and the stars were back to normal; glittering and cold.

The gale had ended and he slowly slipped backinto the safety of his nest, burrowed in the security of the large maple roots. Moonbeam settled in for the night, but he couldn't sleep. His blue eyes glowed in the night as he thought about what horrors could come for his clan.

Chapter 1

"Get down from there!"

Snowkit glanced down from the branch he was gripping, his claws digging in as deep as a kits' claws would go. His mother Yellowleaf was looking up at him with worry in her eyes. He was only a tail length or two from the clearing below. Snowkit turned to see his sister clinging nervously to the base of the branch.

"Come on Emberkit, it's not that high up." This was the highest they had climbed before, but Snowkit wanted to go higher. *I'll be the best climber in all of EmeraldClan!*

Snowkit turned back around and edged closer to the tip of the branch, new leaf buds brushing against his soft white and ginger fur. He heard Emberkit edging along behind him, letting out little anxious mews. They were four moons old now. Snowkit knew that they weren't old enough to be apprentices but he couldn't wait. Their nursery games were starting to become boring.

"Snowkit, the branch is dipping under our weight! We should find a thicker one," he heard his sister say nervously. With one last look down to the ground he turned nimbly around and headed towards the trunk, slipping quickly past his littermate.

"If you don't get down now, you'll be cleaning the elders pelts for ticks!" their mother called from below. "I'll make sure once you're apprenticed, it'll be your only job for a whole moon."

Snowkit rolled his eyes at his sister, and she shrugged. "I really don't want to do that," she meowed. "And I know Yellowleaf will make sure it happens too. She's so stern."

"I guess you're right," he sighed. "I just can't stay in camp anymore! New leaf is here and I want to explore the whole forest!" Snowkit

was so frustrated and bored; moss-ball can only be fun for so long.

They both scrambled down the trunk and landed with a little thump on the ground. Their mother came over and immediately started licking the ruffled fur on Snowkit's head. He tried to push her away. "I'm almost a 'paw mother, I can clean myself."

"Fine, then. If you're so grown-up, why don't you go collect the dried moss in our nest and bring it to the apprentices? Mistpaw and Meltpaw are out collecting more bedding right now." Yellowleaf bent her head and began to clean Emberkit's ears instead. She let out a muffled protest, but didn't stop their mother. He couldn't blame her for not wanting to say anything, he was sure she didn't want to have to help him with his chore.

Snowkit stalked over to the nursery and crawled under the tightly woven brambles that sheltered the den. It was nestled in the side of the gully, in a spacious cave. There was a small clearing out in front of the cave tucked under the brambles as well. That was where they ate.

The floor of the nursery was soft and sandy, and felt cool on his pads. He skipped over Flowerkit and Starnose's nest and headed for his and Emberkit's at the back of the den.

Snowkit sniffed among the nest and scraped out the dry and old moss. He messily scooped it together into a ball and rolled it out of the den. Outside along the edge of the clearing, warriors were chatting about their day and sharing tongues.

Badgerclaw picked a couple of mice form the fresh kill pile and brought them over to share with Specklepelt. Snaketail was crouched near his mate devouring a vole, but every once in a while he would glance around the clearing suspiciously.

Snowkit noticed Emberkit sitting a fox length away talking animatedly to Flowerkit, tail waving in the air. Her back was to him. A devious idea struck in his head like lightning. He picked up the clump of moss in his teeth and crouched low. His tail flicked back and forth as he crept forward towards his littermate.

"Ouf! What was that for?" Emberkit spun around with moss sticking to her back. Her yellow eyes were round in indignation. Snowkit let out a mrow of laughter; he had caught her right in the back of the head!

Flowerkit stifled a snort as she tried not to laugh at the younger kit beside her. Snowkit laughed even harder when he noticed Flowerkit had a piece stuck to the top of her cream coloured head as well.

"You didn't even see me coming!" he meowed between giggles. "You looked like a stunned mouse!"

Emberkit scraped together what she could of the exploded moss ball around her and flung it at Snowkit. He was too busy rolling on the ground to notice, and the loose ball of dried bedding disintegrated as it flew into his side.

"Hey!" he meowed.

"Got you back," Emberkit snorted. She flicked the moss off Flowerkit's head with her tail and then groomed the moss bits out of her own fur.

"You guys are so funny," Flowerkit mused. "I'm going to miss being in the nursery and playing with both of you." Snowkit narrowed his eyes. She was going to be an apprentice very soon. *It's not fair! I want to be an apprentice too.* Flowerkit looked pleased with herself.

"We'll miss you too," said Emberkit. "But you know, it won't be long before we move into your den with you! I'll catch up to you and I bet I'll be the best hunter!" She dropped into the hunters crouch, haunches swaying side to side as she readied to pounce on Flowerkit. Flowerkit dropped to the ground in retaliation and they circled each other in a mock battle.

"Who's going to pick up all this moss?"

Snowkit turned around sheepishly at the voice behind him. His mother looked down on him disapprovingly.

"We were just playing." He scuffed the ground with his ginger front paw. His mother twitched her ear, but didn't look as disappointed

as he thought she would. There was a gleam of amusement in her eyes.

"You and Emberkit can both clean up this mess and put it outside the camp wall. Meltpaw will bring the new moss in for us." Yellowleaf turned and headed for the fresh kill pile. "Then you may both eat."

Snowkit hurried and cleaned what he could, both Emberkit and Flowerkit helped out. As soon as they were about to bring the moss outside Mistpaw and Meltpaw came in through the prickly bramble entrance, jaws laden with fresh moss.

All three kits hurried to finish the job and then scampered over to choose their dinner. Snowkit nosed around the fresh kill pile and smelled a particularly juicy vole at the very bottom. He scooped it out, making a slight mess of the pile, and brought it over to the nursery clearing to eat. Flowerkit and Emberkit brought a huge squirrel to share. The prey was getting fatter and more plentiful now that new leaf was in full bloom.

Snowkit bit into the vole and his jaws flooded with the juicy prey. "Yummy," he mumbled through a mouthful of food. He couldn't wait until he could catch his own prey one day.

When he was done he licked his lips and padded into the cave. Snowkit settled into their nest and Emberkit snuggled in close beside him, her pelt brushing his comfortingly. She started to groom his fur with long rhythmic strokes. He was glad to have such a great littermate. Sure Emberkit could be a little stubborn and frustrating, but she was great fun to play with.

As Snowkit was drifting into sleep, the sweet, milky smell of his mother floated around him. *She must be heading in for the night*, he thought. Emberkit shifted as their mother curled her body protectively around her two kits. Snowkit felt safe and warm surrounded by his kin, and he fell sound asleep.

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Snowkit woke to the sounds of chickadees chirping high in the trees

above the camp. He lifted his head and saw both his mother and sister still sound asleep. The dawn sun washed the den in a pale yellow as light poured through the braches of the nursery. *It would be a perfect morning for hunting.*

He opened his mouth and scented the air. He thought he could smell the chickadees and a faint scent of mouse, but they were all drowned out by the musty odour of the nursery and all the different cat scents in the camp. He shook out his fur frustrated by his inadequate skills.

He crept quietly from his nest past Flowerkit and Starnose, who were fast asleep, and out into the clearing. To his left was the entrance tunnel, a tightly woven path through the brambles that surrounded and protected their camp. It lay in the deepest part of the gully. Many moons of paw prints had dappled the ground through the tunnel and into the camp. The warriors' den was between the entrance and the nursery, hidden within a huge hawthorn bush. The little white flowers were in bloom in the early new leaf weather.

The apprentices' den was across the gully. They slept in a leatherwood bush; it's dense branches showing the green buds that would turn into bright green leaves. Beside them the elders slept under a towering cedar tree, it's branches swooping low to the ground to offer them good cover in all weather. Not to mention the cedar tree smelled amazing. Snowkit loved to lay in the shade and listen to Whitemoss's stories.

I love her tales about when Sleetstar and his littermates were kits, he thought. *They got into more trouble than I ever have!*

At the far shallower end of the gully grew a huge old maple tree, its branches twisting out above the camp, almost as thick as its trunk. It was covered in a thin green layer of moss, except where Sleetstar found paw holds to climb up the trunk and into his nest. He slept in a crook between a thick, flat branch and the trunk itself. The encircling branches sheltered it, and a den woven out of sticks and leaves was made to keep out the wind and snow in leaf-bare. Snowkit couldn't wait to be leader one day and gaze down on his Clan from above. *I bet everyone wants to be leader, but one day it will*

be me! And Emberkit can be my deputy of course. He purred at the thought.

Snowkit caught a glimpse of silver fur as Moonbeam turned in his den in the roots of the great maple. A strong scent of unknown herbs drifted on the breeze. *He must be counting his store,* Snowkit assumed. He let his chest fur brush the ground as he stretched his long ginger and white forepaws in front of him.

The camp was quiet this early in the morning. The dawn patrol would have left already, but many cats were still sound asleep. He heard stirring and pricked his ears. Littletail, Snaketail, and Specklepelt quietly slipped out of the warriors' den. Littletail and Snaketail called to their apprentices and Mistpaw and Meltpaw stalked sleepily out of their den.

"We're going on an early hunting patrol," Snaketail called and turned towards the entrance tunnel. "I want you two to be sharp. Prey is running again, but it will be a while before it's plentiful." He turned and looked pointedly at his apprentice Meltpaw. "I don't want you stomping around and scaring the prey all the way to the meadow."

Meltpaw rolled her eyes. "Alright, alright. I know I have to practice being quiet. It's not my fault I was born with heavy paws." Mistpaw giggled at her denmate and padded gracefully away towards their mentors. Meltpaw trotted behind, her tail tip twitching.

"I wish we could be apprentices."

Snowkit spun to see Emberkit padding out of the den behind him. She shook out her white fur and blinked the sleep out of her eyes.

"All in due time," Yellowleaf meowed as she slipped past them both. She let out a huge yawn and stretched, then headed for the dirtplace tunnel.

Snowkit sniffed. "Me too. I can't wait two more moons."

Emberkit's eyes suddenly lit up. "I have an idea," she whispered. Snowkit twitched his one ginger ear; he wondered what Emberkit

was so excited about. "Maybe we can speed up our last two moons and prove to Sleetstar that we're worthy of being apprentices now!"

"How?" Snowkit queried.

"Let's catch prey!" Emberkit eyes blazed. "Sleetstar will see that we're ready to be apprentices and he'll have to have the naming ceremony!"

"Shh!" Snowkit whispered. Oneclaw, Robintalon, and Lizardbelly were stepping out of the warriors' den and padded past towards their deputy, Flameclaw. The camp was stirring now; warriors were awake and waiting to hear where Flameclaw assigned them.

Emberkit crouched closer to Snowkit. "Wouldn't that be great?" she asked excitedly.

"Where should we hunt?"

"Away from camp, maybe closer to the Rocky Hills. Not many patrols go that way I heard. Whitemoss told me that the Rocky Hills are dangerous."

"Okay! Let's go," agreed Snowkit with his pelt fluffed out in anticipation. He ignored the nagging fear about the Rocky Hills and pushed it to the back of his mind.

They crowded the entrance to the nursery as they saw their mother pad back into the clearing and over to the other warriors. She wouldn't return to her duties until her two kits were apprenticed. *Maybe we could speed that up today!* Snowkit was sure his mother would be proud of them.

Emberkit lead the way around the edge of the clearing towards the dirtplace tunnel. Snowkit glanced behind to make sure no one was following and slipped out after her. He wrinkled his nose at the smell. "I don't think anyone saw us," he breathed.

"Good." His sister snuck around the outer wall of brambles and headed out into the forest towards the rising sun.

"Do you now where we're going?" Snowkit asked. The trees were

tall and grey, the tips of their branches light green with early buds. They crowded close together and the undergrowth was thick.

"I think so." Emberkit sounded nervous as she headed away from a well-used track and squeezed between a thick clump of bracken and a prickly thorn bush.

Snowkit's gaze swept the forest around him. The undergrowth was bare in patches, but buds were swelling in the morning sun. The birds were chirping high up in the trees, a light green haze on all of their branches. New leaf was here and it was warm and comforting to Snowkit.

"I can smell mouse!" Emberkit froze and he almost bumped into her tail. It was quivering with excitement. Snowkit opened his jaws to let the forest scents bathe his tongue. There was the smell of fresh growing plants, and a patrol had passed by here earlier. *Sunpelt, Badgerclaw, Rainwhisker, and Specklepelt*. He was proud of himself for being able to identify which cats were on patrol.

He breathed in once more. Yes! There was the smell of mouse, strong and fresh. It made his mouth water.

"It's up ahead," he whispered, he could hear it scrabbling in the undergrowth now, a couple tail lengths ahead. "You scented it, you go for it."

Emberkit nodded and dropped into a hunters crouch. She slid forward on the forest floor, barely making a sound. Luckily the mouse was nibbling on a seed and was distracted. It didn't notice Emberkit until it was too late. She pounced and landed awkwardly, but she managed to snap its neck with a quick bite.

"That was great!" Snowkit purred. His sister turned to face him proudly with the mouse dangling from her jaws.

"My hunter's crouch needs some work, but maybe soon we'll be able to learn properly! They have to see we're ready, we're going to bring back fresh kill for our clan."

"I bet Yellowleaf will be proud of us. I'm sure she's tired of being

stuck in the camp all day."

"I know I'm tired of it," Emberkit sighed. "We're four moons old, but I feel old enough to be a 'paw."

Snowkit nodded in agreement. He felt the same as his littermate. *We're already out hunting, what more can they want?* He shook out his pelt and padded forward. Emberkit picked up her mouse and followed behind.

Only a couple fox lengths ahead Snowkit spotted a squirrel. *Yes! This squirrel is so fat I bet it can't run very fast.* He flicked his ears to warn Emberkit as he began to stalk towards it. The squirrel was sniffing among the roots of an elm tree. Its thick droopy branches were almost trailing on the ground.

He stepped lightly with each paw and kept his eyes focused on his prey. But his back brushed a bracken frond and it swayed noisily. The squirrel darted up the nearby tree, altered by the sound. Snowkit growled in frustration and sped after it.

He swarmed up the trunk, his sharp claws digging easily in the bark as he followed it up the tree. It darted from branch to branch and climbed higher and higher. The branches soon started to thin out. The squirrel was still just out of reach.

Then it leaped across to the next tree. Groaning, Snowkit halted and stared after it, his pelt prickling in frustration.

"Snowkit!"

He looked down at his sister. She was incredibly small on the forest floor, but he could still see the worry in her eyes.

I've never been this high before! He panicked, franticly looking for a way down. *I'm stuck!* He wailed in his head. A little weaker he called out to his sister, "I don't know how to get down." He trailed off, too scared to be embarrassed.

"Can't you climb down the way you went up?" she asked from below. Her voice seemed very far away.

"No! I don't know how I got up here!"

"But if I go for help, we'll get in trouble for sure. We'll be searching the elders for ticks moons from now!" Snowkit knew she was right, but he was so afraid, his chest burned and he couldn't think straight. "Just don't look down," his sister reasoned.

Snowkit closed his eyes. He was on a branch three, maybe four fox lengths from the ground, close to the trunk of the tree. His claws gripped the bark so tight they ached.

He took a breath and opened his eyes. The branches were close together. Maybe he could get down if he took it slow. He turned around slowly and let a back paw dangle as he searched for a branch below. His back claws scraped on bark. He let out a breath he didn't know he was holding as he scrambled backwards down the tree.

"You're doing great! Only a couple more limbs and you can jump down!"

Snowkit jumped from the last branch a tail length from the ground. He sighed in relief as he landed in the soft moss around the bottom of the tree. Emberkit ran up to him and sniffed his body anxiously. She pressed her pelt into his. It was comforting and calmed his racing heart.

"We should get back before we're missed," she said. Snowkit nodded and she flicked her tail tip over his ear with affection. "We should name you Skykit! You were so high up in the tree I could barely see you," she smiled, picked up her fresh kill, and nudged him towards camp.

"I didn't realize I climbed so high! I wish I didn't miss that squirrel though, it was so fat." He padded along behind her. The mouse she caught was dangling between her legs and she had to lift her head to avoid treading on it.

They followed their scent trail back to camp, the sun now high above the trees. The air was thick with the scent of new flowers. Snowkit brushed past a patch of fresh forget-me-nots, their little

blue petals bright in the dark undergrowth. They were just starting to bloom now, littering the ground with their delicate petals.

As they pushed their way back through the dirtplace tunnel, Snowkit could hear voices raised in worry. *I bet it's over us,* he thought. *But there's no need to worry!* His scruff began to fluff and he continued forward cautiously.

Yellowleaf was franticly pacing around Oneclaw, Littletail, Specklepelt, Badgerclaw, and Moonbeam. Littletail was following her with his amber eyes. "They've never left the camp before! What if something got them, a fox or a badger?" Her pale peach coloured pelt was fluffed up in agitation and her yellow eyes were alight with worry.

Oneclaw flicked his ear. "They're always getting into mischief. They're probably just playing around."

"I'm sure they're fine Yellowleaf," Moonbeam mewed gently.

Sunpelt leaped down from the leaders den, Sleetstar following. He padded up to his mate and brushed his muzzle against hers. "They'll be okay, my love. Sleetstar will send out a patrol." His eyes were clouded with worry. Snowkit felt a knot of guilt beginning in his belly.

"We're going to be in trouble," Emberkit muttered behind him. They slowly crept across the clearing. There was no point in trying to hide now. Yellowleaf saw them as they neared the group of their clanmates.

"Where have you been?" she exploded as she covered the rest of the distance between them. "You had me so worried, and your leader was about to send out a search patrol!"

"I know," Snowkit looked down embarrassed. "But we went hunting, and Emberkit caught a mouse!" He perked up, realizing that their outing was successful, no matter how much his mother would chastise them. "We didn't get lost mother, and we brought back fresh kill for the Clan."

Sleetstar and the rest of the warriors gathered around roused by the commotion. Emberkit stepped proudly past her brother and held out her mouse. Their clanmates were murmuring amongst themselves and Snowkit heard someone say, "I remember when you were getting into trouble as a kit Yellowleaf."

"I think most young cats get restless," said another. "There was no harm done."

Their mother looked down on them sternly. Her tail tip was twitching in annoyance, but she glanced up at Sunpelt as he pressed his bright ginger pelt against her. She sighed, her fur beginning to lie flat.

"I think you were both very brave," their father said. He bent and sniffed Emberkit's mouse. "And that is a very nice mouse. Good catch!"

"Thank you," Emberkit puffed out her chest proudly. "It was easy really."

"She did great," Snowkit added. "I think she'll be an amazing hunter when we're apprenticed." He hoped adding that on wouldn't push any buttons, but he wanted to remind Sleetstar of why they really went out. He glanced up at his leader cautiously.

"Apprentices, eh?" Sleetstar mused. He paused as if to think about it, but amusement sparkled in his eyes. "I know you're both ready and willing, but tradition is tradition. You're not six moons yet."

"But we're ready!" Snowkit interrupted. Then he remembered he was talking to the Clan leader. "Respectfully," he added quietly.

"I remember the feeling of being confined to camp as a kit too, but you two are young and you should enjoy the carefree days you have ahead. Once you're an apprentice there are lots of responsibilities. It's not all fun and games. You will be ready before you know it," Sleetstar meowed.

The cats around them started to disperse. Oneclaw called Specklepelt, and Robintalon over and they left through the tunnel

for a hunting patrol. Littletail shooed Mistpaw towards the elders' den to clean out their bedding.

"In the meantime, I'm sure Whitemoss would enjoy that mouse you caught Emberkit. Why don't you bring it to her?" Sunpelt really did look proud of them, and so did Yellowleaf now that she had calmed down. He brushed his tail over his son's ear and padded away to speak with Flameclaw.

"That's a great idea!" said Emberkit, pleased with herself. She padded towards the cedar tree where the elders nested and Snowkit quickly caught up with her.

"I guess we'll still have to wait to be 'paws, but that was really exciting!" Snowkit remembered.

"Even when you got stuck up in that tree?" she teased. Snowkit shuddered at that one memory and shoved it to the back of his mind. He didn't want to climb that high again any time soon.

"Yeah," he muttered in response. "You would have been scared if you climbed that high. At least I did it. I bet you could never climb that high up!"

"I'll show you!" Emberkit shot back. "Tomorrow, we'll climb the small maple above the nursery, then we'll see who's the better climber."

Snowkit rolled his eyes at her back. *We climbed it yesterday and you were too scared to venture very far along the branch,* he retorted in his head. They pushed under the cedar branches and into the elders' den. Swiftear poked his head up as they stepped in. Whitemoss and Stiffwhisker were sharing tongues. Mistpaw was busy sifting through the moss and bracken.

Emberkit walked up and placed the mouse down. "I caught a mouse!"

"How did you manage that? Mice don't just wander into a gully full of cats," Swiftear said indignantly.

"We snuck out." Snowkit stuck his nose in the air, daring one of

them to say something. "We wanted to prove we were ready to be apprentices, but Sleetstar insisted we wait." Snowkit trailed off, not sure how the elders would take the news of their disobedience.

"You're not ready yet!" Mistpaw huffed. "You're too young." Her blue eyes flashed in the gloom and Snowkit scrunched his nose.

"We'll be ready before you know it! You better watch your back."

"Yeah right," Mistpaw hissed under her breath.

"You two stop squabbling!" Swiftear reprimanded them. Snowkit immediately froze and dipped his head to the elder. Swiftear could be a mean old cat. The light grey apprentice narrowed her eyes at Snowkit, but continued on with her chores.

"I remember a time when Sleetstar himself was caught out of camp with his littermates as kits," Stiffwhisker said. She looked pointedly at Whitemoss. "I'm sure these two would love a story in return for hunting down this juicy mouse for us."

"Yes please!" Emberkit settled down as Swiftear tucked into the mouse. He purred and shared the mouse with Stiffwhisker. Snowkit cuddled in beside his sister, pressing his fur against hers. They looked expectantly up at Whitemoss. She tucked her front paws under herself and began her story.

Chapter 2

"Let all cats join together beneath the Great Maple for a Clan meeting."

Snowkit's ginger and white pelt trembled with excitement as he heard Sleetstar's calling. He quickly glanced over at his sister sitting up straight beside him just outside the nursery entrance.

"Remember to touch noses with your mentors when you're assigned them," their mother recapped. "And be quiet and sit up straight, this is a big moment for you both."

"I know mother, I know," Snowkit said quickly. He ducked out of the way as she tried to smooth his pelt down with her tongue.

Cats were milling around the clearing, emerging from their dens. It was early morning, the birds were chirping and the sun was peaking through the leaves at the tops of the trees. Littletail, Oneclaw, Rainwhisker, and Robintalon padded sleepily out from the warriors' den. Meltwater, recently made a warrior, was already awake and washing her blue-grey fur, it sparkled gently in the morning light. Rainwhisker stared as he walked past and Robintalon flicked her brother's ear with her tail.

Moonbeam led Cloudpaw from the medicine cat den and settled under the Great Maple. Whitemoss, Stiffwhisker, and Swiftear padded slowly out of the elders' den, stretching their stiff joints.

"What has Sleetstar got to say this early in the morning?" Swiftear grumbled, as he stretched his legs. Whitemoss flicked his ear with her tail-tip. Specklepelt passed them as she emerged from the nursery. She had started to sleep there a couple nights ago; she was expecting Snaketail's kits within the moon.

Snowkit was itching for the clan to settle down. *I want to be an apprentice* now*! I hope Flameclaw is my mentor.* He looked over at

their flame coloured deputy sitting calmly under the maple tree. Moonbeam and his apprentice Cloudpaw were seated beside him, Cloudpaw looking around distracted by a fluttering moth.

Hurry up... Snowkit thought desperately.

"I want the meeting to start now!" Emberkit voiced his own thoughts. "I can't wait a second longer." She stood up and paced forward a few steps. Yellowleaf stopped her with her tail.

"Wait. We've got to walk out together." She gazed down at her kits, pride glowing in her eyes. They were her first two kits, and they were finally becoming apprentices.

The clan settled around the Great Maple and the din of muffled, sleepy conversations quieted down as Sleetstar raised his tail for silence. He looked down on his clan and then beckoned Snowkit and Emberkit forward.

Snowkit leaped up, excitement blazing through his body, right through from his ear tips to his toes. He stretched his long legs and walked forward towards his clanmates. Emberkit quickened her pace to walk beside her brother. Her eyes sparkled. Yellowleaf followed behind her kits purring loudly.

They sat at the front of the crowd. Snowkit could feel eyes boring into his back. His father sat close by, pride emanating from his fur. Sleetstar leaped down from the Great Maple and stepped towards the two kits.

"These two mischievous kits have finally reached six moons, and I think I speak for all of us when I say I'm happy to finally have them apprenticed. Maybe now they'll stay in line with a mentor watching over them and teaching them," he said amused. The clan murmured in agreement. Emberkit twitched her ears, leaning forward, waiting to be named.

"Emberkit, step forward." She stood and paced forward. "From this moment, until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Emberpaw. Lizardbelly will be your mentor." He nodded to Lizardbelly and she stepped forward. "You are a quick thinker,

confident, and always do what you know to be right. I hope you pass these qualities on to this young apprentice."

Emberpaw stretched and touched Lizardbelly's nose affectionately, happy to be an apprentice at last. Lizardbelly puffed out her black and white striped fur proudly, as she walked Emberpaw to the side of the group of cats. They settled beside Littletail and Mistpaw.

"Emberpaw! Emberpaw!" He joined in with his clanmates as they called out her new name.

Snowkit turned and looked expectantly at his leader. *It's my turn now!*

"Snowkit, step forward." He quickly stepped up to Sleetstar. His heart was racing. "From this moment, until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Snowpaw. Charfur will be your mentor." Snowkit hesitated, he had hoped for Flameclaw. But Charfur was just as great a warrior as Flameclaw. He lifted his tail happily as Charfur strode towards him. "Charfur, you have proved to be a great mentor in the past, I hope you are able to pass on your excellent hunting skills, your wisdom, and your courage in training this young apprentice."

Charfur bent to touch Snowpaw's nose. He didn't have to lean down far; Snowpaw's legs had grown quickly. Charfur's eyes glinted; he seemed happy to have Snowpaw as his apprentice. They walked over to sit beside Lizardbelly and Emberpaw as the clan chanted his new name.

"Snowpaw! Snowpaw!" they called. He basked in the glory of finally escaping the nursery and becoming an apprentice for his clan. Flowerpaw trotted up to them, she was made an apprentice two moons ago, and had Badgerclaw as her mentor.

"Congratulations, you two! I guess I've got competition now, but you'll have to be able to keep up with me first," she bragged.

"I'm glad we're going to be denmates again," said Emberpaw, weaving around her friend.

"You had better watch your back!" Snowpaw teased. "I'm an apprentice now, and I'm going to learn everything way faster than you!"

"No way! I've got two moons on you. I bet you can't do this." Flowerpaw stood on her hind legs and balanced as she clawed at the air with her forepaws, tail flicking to keep her balanced. She looked a lot stronger than when she was in the nursery, subtle muscles rippling under her creamy fur.

Snowpaw tried to stand and copy her, but quickly lost his footing and tumbled sideways into Charfur. "Oof!"

"We'll get you practicing your battle moves soon," said Charfur amused at his eagerness. "But first, we should explore the territory." He looked at Lizardbelly and she nodded her head in agreement.

"It's a big territory, so we had better get started," she said. Lizardbelly turned and walked towards the camp entrance. Emberpaw hurried to catch up to her mentor.

"Wait for me!" she called, her shorter legs struggling to keep up.

Charfur and Snowpaw padded after them and out through the tunnel into the forest. Snowpaw observed the forest around him, trying to commit every fern, bramble, flower, and tree to memory.

The trees towered over him, tall, old, and covered in moss. The undergrowth was thick now, every plant in full leaf as it neared green leaf. The new leaf flowers had withered away, but the forest remained a dark emerald green. High above in the canopy where the sun touched the tops of the trees, the leaves were turned to hues of golden yellow and bright green.

The sun was high in the sky when Snowpaw noticed the trees thinning up ahead. He could see bright light beyond the tree line.

"This is our first border," Charfur called from ahead. He slowed to let Snowpaw catch up to him. Lizardbelly and Emberpaw were

already stopped farther ahead. His sister's ears were pricked in interest; he hurried to see the border.

"Whoa," he breathed as he took it all in. The trees ended abruptly, and there was a huge open land filled with long grass swaying in the breeze. It stretched as far as his eyes could see. To his left ran a little stream chattering along a stone riverbed. It flowed out from deeper into their territory all the way from the Rocky Hills. The ground here was more soft and wet, not like the hard stone-packed earth near their camp.

"This is the meadow," Lizardbelly explained to the apprentices. "It's not much use to us, so we created the border on the edge of the trees. There's not much for prey out there, except field birds." Snowpaw and Emberpaw were nodding enthusiastically, trying to retain everything their mentors were telling them.

"As well as moose and deer," Charfur added. "But you really don't want to get close to them. They're both big animals with huge heavy feet that will stomp you dead in a heartbeat." He exchanged an amused glance with Lizardbelly as the two young cats' eyes widened in fear.

"Don't worry, if you stay away, they won't bother you," Lizardbelly assured them.

"But do they wander into the forest? What happens if they do, has that happened before? Has anyone died from a moose attack?" Emberpaw shot out question after question. "Can we kill them if they threaten our Clan?"

"Slow down," called her mentor. "Today is only your first day out of camp, save some questions for the rest of your apprenticeship."

It's not our first day out of camp, thought Snowpaw, remembering the mouse his sister caught when they snuck out to hunt for the Clan as kits.

Emberpaw closed her mouth deliberately, trying to stay quiet as her

mentor went on explaining their territory. "We don't patrol this border as often because it doesn't border on another clans territory. It's usually pretty safe, just if you see one of those brute animals, make sure you keep your distance." Emberpaw shifted on her paws. "And yes," Lizardbelly added, "they do wander onto the forest sometimes, but never very far. Like I said just keep your distance and you'll be fine."

"What can you scent?" Charfur spoke up, asking Snowpaw.

He opened his jaws and let the smells of the forest bathe his tongue. "Well our border scent first of all." He breathed in again. "The grasses in the meadow, squirrel, and some weird sort of bird I think." He finished a bit confused.

"That's very good! And that bird is a grouse. They feed in both the meadow and the forest. They're an easy catch and they're pretty tasty."

"Our scent is old," added Emberpaw trying to one-up her brother. "Maybe a couple days since anyone patrolled here." Charfur and Lizardbelly both looked impressed.

"That's correct," purred her mentor. "Now lets head deeper into the forest and explore the other borders."

They headed back into the dim light that trickled through the thick leaved canopy above. There were scents and sounds all around Snowpaw, crowding his mind and filling it with questions.

Emberpaw was padding along quickly ahead of the group looking up at the trees. She wasn't watching where she placed her paws and got caught up in a trailing bramble.

"Ow!" She pulled at the bramble, but it just tightened around her ginger paw, tangling her further.

"Hold still," Lizardbelly hurried forward and teased her paw out of the prickles with her teeth. "There, you're free. Now watch where you're going, I know this is exciting, but a warrior must always be aware of what's around her." She sounded harsher than she looked,

her eyes gentle in understanding.

"Are you okay?" Snowpaw walked beside his littermate. She was stepping gingerly on the front paw that she had gotten caught.

"Yeah I'm okay," she sighed, embarrassed. "It'll be better if I keep walking on it, I'm sure."

Snowpaw flicked his tail over her back. "Silly mouse-brain," he said affectionately.

Charfur and Lizardbelly were walking ahead close enough for their pelts to brush. They looked peaceful as they trod along through the undergrowth, easily weaving around and under bushes. *One day I'll be confident enough to move that quickly and silently through our forest.*

But now, on his first real day out of the camp, his paws were clumsy as they tripped and slipped over the forest floor. It was littered with leaves and twigs, the bushes were thick and prickly, and he was still a little too short to see over most of the vegetation.

Their mentors started to slow down ahead, caution in their steps. Snowpaw pricked his ears, wondering what had them worried.

"This is the edge of our border with SapphireClan," Charfur called quietly over his shoulder, keeping his eyes fixed ahead. Lizardbelly crouched to the ground, tail twitching.

Emberpaw and Snowpaw crowded behind to see what was ahead. Snowpaw's eyes watered at the scent wafting up from ahead; very strong and fishy, but there was also a clear scent on the breeze, like cold wind or ice. Emberpaw screwed up her muzzle at the smell.

"That's SapphireClan," explained Lizardbelly. "You'll soon get used to their stench, but it is a strong one for sure."

"What's that fresh smell though, that can't be SapphireClan too?" asked Snowpaw.

"That's the lake you can smell. The breeze is blowing off of it and into the trees today," mused Charfur. Snowpaw sniffed again and felt the breeze ruffle his whiskers and ear fur.

Just in front of them lay a flat rocky path, criss-crossed with roots and small rocks. It was about three tail lengths long and on the other side the forest continued.

"This is the twoleg foot-path. This is where our land ends and SapphireClan's begins. But be careful," Charfur warned. "The twolegs walk this path often in the warmer moons, and sometimes they bring their dogs with them."

"I've never seen a twoleg before," meowed Emberpaw. "Or a dog. What are they like?"

"They tower tall above us and only walk on their two back legs. They're weird and hairless and have brightly coloured pelts." Lizardbelly explained. "But don't get too close, they like to pick us up sometimes, or even attack us, and their dogs are terrors. They're fast and loud, and most of them are big enough to crash through any of our undergrowth."

Snowpaw looked worriedly around, ears pricked for any weird sounds. He didn't want to meet any twolegs out here. Emberpaw looked like her thoughts mimicked his, worry bright in her yellow eyes.

"Our border runs along this twoleg path from the lake to the Rocky Hills." Charfur looked up and down the path. "That way," he pointed left with his tail," is the lake. We can reach it through our territory, but we won't go there today. And that way," he motioned in the opposite direction," is the way to the Ravine and RubyClan."

Lizardbelly rose from her crouch and shook out her pelt. They guided the apprentices back into the forest, far enough from the footpath, but close enough that they could follow along beside it. There was a strong EmeraldClan scent; the dawn patrol must have passed this way earlier.

Charfur and Lizardbelly stopped a couple steps ahead. The two apprentices stopped beside them.

"See that path extending from the one that marks our border?"

asked Charfur. Snowpaw looked out over the border marker; there was another small footpath branching off from the one that bordered all of EmeraldClan, trees lining either side. Emberpaw was up on her hind legs trying to get a better view.

"Yeah, I can see it," Snowpaw spoke up.

"Well that's the border between SapphireClan and RubyClan. And that's the path we follow to get to the Ravine every full moon," he continued. "You can't see the Ravine now because it's like a huge claw scratch dug in the ground. From here it'll just look like the flat ground continues on."

Snowpaw gazed in wonder, trying to see where the Ravine dipped down into the ground, but however hard he stared through the trees, it looked just like Charfur had said.

"Can we go to the next gathering?" Emberpaw asked enthusiastically. "We're apprentices now, can't we go please?" She was on all fours again, her white pelt bunched up in eagerness.

"That'll be up to Sleetstar to decide. Today is only your first day," Lizardbelly reminded her. Emberpaw looked crestfallen.

"We'll ask Sleetstar when we get back to the gully," Snowpaw tried to cheer her up. *I really want to go too. I wonder what the other Clans are like.*

The trees grew thickly along the path, as they did in the rest of their territory, but on the other side of the path they began to thin out. Snowpaw could see short grass and stubby trees growing on the other side between the trees, and big rocks jutting out from the ground in random patches. A new scent tickled his senses. It was light and airy, but also deep and musky.

"That must be RubyClan!" he meowed.

"That's right," said his mentor proudly, keeping up the pace. "Our border with them follows this twoleg path as well. You have to watch with them, sometimes they chase prey over our borders. The

path here is thinner and less visible."

"Even though we patrol it regularly, they don't seem to even have the sense of a new born kit," Lizardbelly added stubbornly. Her shoulders were stiff as she kept walking, ears pricked and alert for any odd sounds or smells.

The undergrowth here was thinner under the close growing coniferous trees. The needled trees cast an eerie shadow as the cats padded along silently, keeping to what undergrowth they could find. The thick layer of needles and moss covering the ground muffled their paw steps, but Snowpaw felt exposed.

"They seem like bad cats," whispered Emberpaw beside him. "Remember the stories they used to tell us? They're big enough to catch eagles! And they could snatch us up if we're not well behaved."

"It's just a nursery story to keep us following the rules," Snowpaw assured his sister, but he wasn't entirely sure himself. He glanced nervously over the border at RubyClan territory. He wouldn't want to meet one of them before he's battle trained.

They continued along the path until they could see the Rocky Hills trailing down close to the twoleg path. The sharp grey and black rocks almost met where the path ran between the hills. Their mentors circled the group back towards the camp, not bothering to show them the Rocky Hills today. Charfur had insisted that it was too far a distance to cover in one day.

The sun was starting to sink towards the tree tops as the day trailed on. They were shown the training hill, a large, wide, flat hill that was surrounded by tall pine and cedar trees. They used that space to practice battle moves and to jump from tree branch to tree branch. The needled limbs swooped down close to the top of the hill so that they could easily leap into the lowest ones.

"Tomorrow I'll bring you here and we can practice the hunting crouch," Charfur said to Snowpaw.

"Okay!" he replied enthusiastically. "I want to learn everything I

can!" Snowpaw padded along on lighter paws, excited to start his apprentice training.

"Can we train here tomorrow too?" Emberpaw piped up. She was walking beside her mentor behind the other two. She was looking at Lizardbelly expectantly.

"Perhaps," she said. "But I might get you to practice climbing tomorrow, I haven't decided yet."

Emberpaw flicked her tail, but she didn't look disappointed. "I'm good at climbing," she said determinedly. "We used to do it a lot as kits," she called up to her brother. Snowpaw twitched his ears to show he heard her. He was focused on the path ahead as it wove through ferns, saplings, and wildflowers. This was the trail back to the camp and he wanted to remember it.

Suddenly Charfur stopped and lifted his tail for the others to stop too. He crouched low and his hind paws kneaded the ground as he determined his position. Snowpaw pricked his ears, not daring to speak out. His mentor had spotted a squirrel up ahead. He circled around as he crept forward. The squirrel didn't notice him until it was too late.

Snowpaw held his breath as Charfur pounced. He landed squarely on its shoulders as it tried to run away. He nipped the squirrels neck and carried it back proudly to the other three cats.

"That was amazing!" Snowpaw said in awe. He wished he could have caught that squirrel two moons ago. "Why did you circle around, why didn't you just jump at it from where you were?" Snowpaw asked quickly.

"I didn't want it to smell me, so I changed position in relation to the wind. But you'll learn all of that soon," Charfur mumbled around his prey. Lizardbelly padded up and brushed her black and white pelt against his grey one, purring.

"That was a good catch," she said. Charfur looked embarrassed, but he didn't pull away from the she-cat.

They padded back towards camp with their apprentices. As they stepped through the entrance tunnel, Flowerpaw and Mistpaw trotted up to meet their new denmates.

"We fixed you both a new nest in the apprentices' den with us," Flowerpaw said happily. "I hope you like them, Badgerclaw and Littletail let us go out and collect some moss for you." Her eyes were bright and kind.

"Let us? More like they made us," muttered Mistpaw. Flowerpaw nudged her affectionately.

"It wasn't that bad. I'm sure they both had a long day walking around the whole territory. I remember doing that too, don't you?" she asked Mistpaw.

"Yeah I do. Moons ago," she sighed. Snowpaw thought she sounded a little bitter, probably because Meltwater was already made a warrior and she was stuck with the three younger cats. But surely she would receive her warrior name soon too.

Mistpaw turned and walked towards the fresh kill pile where Charfur, Littletail, Snaketail, Meltwater, and Specklepelt were milling around. Snaketail had a small grouse clamped in his jaws and led Specklepelt away to share it with her. Starnose and her mate Flameclaw were sharing tongues near the roots of the Great Maple. Sunpelt and Yellowleaf were sharing a pigeon near the warrior's den.

Flowerpaw guided Snowpaw and Emberpaw over to the fresh kill pile. "Choose what you want," she motioned with her tail, "our patrol brought back a lot today," she said proudly.

"Looks like you did really well," Emberpaw acknowledged. "I'll be a great hunter one day too."

"I'll be the best fighter the Clans have ever seen!" Snowpaw added, not to be outdone by his littermate. Emberpaw purred and cuffed him over the ear with a sheathed paw.

"You'll need lots of practice!" she teased affectionately.

"Whatever, I'll show you."

All three chose prey to bring over to the apprentices' den to eat. The sun was well below the trees now, and stars were beginning to twinkle in the indigo sky. Snowpaw licked his lips as he finished the mouse he chose and purred at the memories of the day. *I'm finally an apprentice! I'm going to be the best warrior and maybe even a leader one day. I'm glad Charfur is my mentor,* he thought proudly.

Snowpaw padded into his new den and picked one of the fresh nests Mistpaw and Flowerpaw put together for him and his sister. Mistpaw was already curled in her nest, nose tucked under her tail, fast asleep. Emberpaw and Flowerpaw were chattering excitedly outside about their day.

He circled his nest under the leatherwood bush and lay comfortably in the moss. His heart was soaring; he could finally learn to hunt and fight and be the best for his Clan.

Chapter 3

The moon rose full into the night sky and Silverpelt shone above. Together they lit up the forest with a pale silver light. Snowpaw gazed around in wonder; it was eerie and quiet, but beautiful too. He loved being out in the night, especially now that the weather was turning warmer during the day, but the evenings were still cool.

He saw Sleetstar flick his tail in the corner of his eye and as one the group of cats rose and surged forward into the night. The moonlight dappled the forest floor as Snowpaw and Emberpaw tried to keep up with the rest of the patrol heading to the Ravine. They were going to their first gathering.

As they crossed over the border, RubyClan's thick scent wreathed his senses and made him a little dizzy. The forest here thinned out and the ground became rockier. Snowpaw had to concentrate not to stub a toe or tear a claw.

"This is so exciting!" panted his sister breathlessly. "We must be almost there." She looked back ahead and sped forward, belly low to the ground. Snowpaw caught up with her as the group began to slow down. Sleetstar halted and EmeraldClan bunched around him. Flameclaw stood beside their leader. Sunpelt, Badgerclaw, Lizardbelly, and Moonbeam crowded around the top of the Ravine.

Snowpaw squeezed through after Emberpaw to look down into the Ravine where the three Clans gathered every full moon. His eyes widened as he took it all in. The Ravine was huge!

There were ledges and a narrow path that led down into the bottom where the ground was rocky, but clear of any big boulders, except two, that towered a couple of fox lengths high. The one smaller one leaned up onto the taller rock, their grey, notched surfaces shimmering with frost in the night. The other two Clans were already there, mingling and talking amongst themselves.

Sleetstar motioned for his Clan to follow him down the steep wall of rock. Snowpaw picked his way down carefully, falling behind. When he got to the bottom, Charfur stepped up beside him.

"This is your first gathering," he said. "Make sure you don't say too much. I know how you young cats like to brag." He had a twinkle in his eyes.

"This is a time to learn about other Clans, but make sure you don't tell too much about your own Clan," Snowpaw repeated what his mentor had told him before they left. "I know Charfur."

His pelt was itching to explore. Flowerpaw and Mistpaw led him and Emberpaw to a little group of apprentices. Flowerpaw introduced them to Birdpaw and Hazelpaw of RubyClan. They were sitting beside each other; Birdpaw's dark brown fur was brushing up against Hazelpaw's, lighter brown. Birdpaw had white markings that shone in the moonlight and Snowpaw had to tear his gaze away from the beautiful she-cat as Flowerpaw introduced two toms.

"This is Barkpaw and Talonpaw." She motioned her tail towards the two toms that looked almost identical with their dark brown pelts and flashing amber eyes. "And Petalpaw and Honeypaw," she added. "They're all from SapphireClan."

Honeypaw stood, her golden pelt rippled over her strong muscles. "Welcome. This must be your first gathering. You can sit next to us." She sat back down and Petalpaw scooted over so the three of them could sit. Immediately Mistpaw and Honeypaw began talking to each other with their heads bent close.

Flowerpaw and Emberpaw joined in with the conversation, but Snowpaw only half listened as he gazed around in awe. The walls of the Ravine towered high above their heads. There was a cave on one side; its dark entrance left a curious feeling in Snowpaw and his paw pads prickled. The medicine cats were sitting outside of it, as if they were guarding the cave.

"That's the Star Cave. I saw you looking over there," Birdpaw nodded towards the medicine cats. Snowpaw turned and looked up at her, she was much bigger than him.

"Is that where they meet every half-moon?" he asked her. Birdpaw nodded and Snowpaw looked back in wonder.

Warriors were walking around and elders were sharing tongues. Tawnystar and Wingstar were seated on the taller rock and Sleetstar scrabbled up and sat on the lower stone. Tawnystar yowled for the gathering to begin. The group of apprentices settled in beside each other. Charfur and Lizardbelly were sitting nearby. Littletail and Oneclaw sat next to them as well as some from other clans.

Snowpaw felt intimidated to be surrounded by so many warriors. He was only just made apprentice after all. Wingstar of RubyClan began her account, but Snowpaw wasn't paying attention. He was staring at a particularly well-muscled warrior. His fur was grey, but it shone with a red tint in the dim light. He couldn't help but feel small in comparison.

Tawnystar continued, and when Sleetstar began to speak, Snowpaw finally pricked his ears. He noticed Emberpaw was leaning forward, her small muscles tensed as she waited for their leader to announce their apprenticeship. He mentioned that prey was running well and that they haven't had any trouble from predators in a while.

"And we have two new apprentices gracing us with their presence tonight." Snowpaw sat up straight. Sunpelt and Yellowleaf were purring loudly. "Snowpaw and Emberpaw." He called their names loudly. His clanmates followed suit and then the other two Clans joined in on calling their names.

"Snowpaw! Emberpaw!" Honeypaw, Hazelpaw, and Flowerpaw called out their names loudly. Emberpaw was sitting straight beside him, but he could feel her trembling under the gaze of so many cats. Snowpaw felt uncomfortable too, but wouldn't back down or look scared.

Sleetstar wrapped up his account and then the three leaders jumped down onto the grey rocky ground. Tawnystar called to her deputy Watershine and they gathered their clanmates around them. Barkpaw, Talonpaw, and Petalpaw hurried to leave with them. Honeypaw called a farewell over her shoulder to the new apprentices.

"I'll see you next time! Maybe as a warrior." Her amber eyes sparkled.

"Good luck!" Flowerpaw called after her. "I wish I was going to be a warrior soon too," Flowerpaw whined as she turned back to the other apprentices.

"Me too," said Hazelpaw. "But I feel like it'll be a while still."

Wingstar quickly called RubyClan and they gathered to leave. Snowpaw noticed how broad-shouldered and well-muscled the group of warriors was. Even one of their elders looked formidable with a scowl and fluffed up brown fur.

"We've got to go now too," said Birdpaw. "But maybe we'll see you next time."

"I hope so!" Emberpaw said in a friendly voice.

Birdpaw and Hazelpaw left to join their clanmates as well, and Sleetstar gathered EmeraldClan around him. They clawed their way up the Ravine wall and ran home back to the forest.

Snowpaw was in awe. He had never seen so many warriors in his life! They all looked so strong and fit, he knew he needed to train a lot before he ever met any of them in battle. Even Barkpaw and Talonpaw were bigger than him.

Iwill be the strongest warrior in all the Clans, he vowed. He was going to train so hard to bethe best he could be for his Clan.

Chapter 4

"No, you need to tuck your hind paws in more, you'll get more power in your leap. How many time do I have to say it?" Charfur looked down on Snowpaw, annoyance pricking in both their pelts.

"Fine!" growled Snowpaw in return. He and Emberpaw had been training for four moons now. *I've never come back empty pawed*, he thought bitterly. Snowpaw had always managed to catch something, even if it was just a meagre mouse. His sister, however, was doing a lot better at hunting.

He tucked his back paws in tighter and tensed, ready to leap. "Aim for that pinecone at the edge of the hill," mewed his mentor. Narrowing his eyes and bunching up his hind legs, Snowpaw leaped. He landed a mouse whisker away.

"I'll get it next time," he said impatiently, more annoyed at himself for not being able to do it. Charfur just shook his head. "I'm better at fighting anyway, couldn't we just practice more battle moves instead?"

"I know you're very skilled at fighting, but we need to make you as well rounded a warrior as possible. And that means making you a better hunter," Charfur explained. "How about we go out and practice what I taught you, you'll do better actually putting it to the test."

It had been a long day for Snowpaw, practicing pouncing and stalking. He knew how to hunt, but for some reason he had trouble with it. It wasn't the same as the fast paced battle training; he wasn't patient enough for hunting properly.

He padded after his mentor as he jumped neatly down the training hill and into the forest. It was leaf fall now; the days were getting shorter every day and it was a lot colder. Recent nights had brought frost, but it would usually melt by sun high. The forest was bright

with red and yellow leaves as they spiralled down to the ground around him.

He lost sight of Charfur in the undergrowth, but he followed his scent and the sound of fur swishing through the crackly leaves. As he wound around a patch of pansies, he almost bumped into his mentor. Charfur flicked Snowpaw's nose with his tail.

"I want you to hunt towards the meadow, the wind is blowing off the lake today, so that should help you. Let's make it like a little assessment."

Snowpaw felt worry knotting in his belly. *An assessment? That's a big deal, I don't know if I'm ready for that,* he thought anxiously. But he knew he couldn't fail and he still had many moons of training ahead. This will just be practice for his final assessment.

"Alright," he said determined now that he made up his mind. He would show Charfur that he could be proud of him, and then maybe tomorrow they could practice more fighting techniques. Snowpaw scented the air and set off towards the meadow.

The leaves on the trees rippled in a light breeze. That's all it took to rip them off and strip the branches bare. They floated gently down on the breeze coating the ground with leaf litter. Green leaf had been hot and dry, and leaf fall was chilly. It hadn't rained in almost three moons. But now, as Snowpaw padded on, the dusty leaves crumpling under his paws, he could feel the clouds pressing down on the forest. There was a storm brewing. Dark clouds were crowding the horizon.

It's about time for some rain, he thought, weaving through the thick bushes. His long fur always snagged in the thorns if he wasn't careful. He opened his mouth and immediately robin washed over his scent glands. He stopped and pricked his ears; he could hear it pecking at something up ahead. Snowpaw crouched low, keeping his tail off the ground. He slid carefully forward around a hazel bush and saw the robin among the roots of an oak tree.

He stopped, and made sure the wind wasn't blowing from behind him, although if it was, the robin was sure to have noticed him

already. Snowpaw tried to judge the distance between him and his prey. *About three tail lengths.* He took a deep breath. *I can do this.*

Snowpaw gathered his haunches underneath himself and pushed off the ground. The robin called out as it flapped frantically into the air, but Snowpaw had landed square on its shoulders, squashing it to the ground. He nipped its neck and it lay limp on the ground, wings splayed messily.

"I did it!" Snowpaw called into the trees, he knew Charfur was somewhere watching him. *I landed the leap that I couldn't make while training today,* he purred proudly to himself. Snowpaw triumphantly scraped earth over his robin and set off again in search of more prey.

By the time the evening sky had turned to a shade of dark lavender, Snowpaw had caught a robin, two mice and a small grouse. The grouse had been a challenge and Snowpaw had to chase him through the tall golden meadow grasses before finally catching up and pouncing on it. Its wing had been bent at a funny angle and Snowpaw figured he couldn't fly, but a catch was a catch all the same.

He was padding back to where he buried his mice and robin, when he heard a rustling in the bushes nearby. He dropped his prey and scented the air warily as Charfur stepped out to greet him.

"You did amazing today! See what a little hard work and determination can do? I'll help you bring the fresh kill to our camp and then you can bring some prey to Moonbeam and Cloudpaw." Snowpaw blazed brightly under Charfur's proud gaze, he felt very accomplished after such a long and tiring day.

They padded into the camp as the sun went down and Snowpaw trotted happily over to the medicine cats' den with the two mice hanging from his jaws.

"Moonbeam?" Snowpaw called into the tree roots where he kept his den. He heard a rustling and then Cloudpaw poked her head out, white fur mussed and full of dusty leaves.

"Hello Snowpaw, are those for us?" she asked, sniffing at the mice.

"Yes," he mumbled back, placing the fresh kill on the ground between their paws. "I caught them myself," he said smugly.

"Good job Snowpaw," A deep voice rumbled from farther inside the den. A moment later Moonbeam crawled out, his silvery pelt shining in the late evening light. His broad shoulders rippled under his fur, he was very strongly built to be a medicine cat, Snowpaw realized. *I bet he would be a scary opponent if he had trained to be a warrior.*

"Thanks," Snowpaw replied. He turned away as they began to tuck into their meal. He headed over to his mentor by the fresh kill pile. "May I choose something to eat? I brought Moonbeam and Cloudpaw their fresh kill." He looked hungrily at the pile in front of him, a juicy looking vole on the top. It was his favourite.

"You may," Charfur purred.

Snowpaw picked up the vole he was eyeing and set it down in front of the apprentices' den to eat. Emberpaw slid out of the den and curled down beside him. She began to wash her soft white belly fur.

"I heard you had a successful hunt today," she purred proudly in between licks.

Snowpaw nodded enthusiastically, excited to tell her about his day. "Charfur was really tough on me today," he started. "I just couldn't get my pounce right, but he sent me out to practice and he said it would be like a mock assessment!"

Emberpaw gasped, "was is hard? I would be so nervous! I don't think I'm ready to be assessed yet, but I want to be a warrior so bad."

"I was pretty nervous at first, but then I caught a robin with a really neat leap and I knew I could do it! At the end of the day I came back with four pieces of fresh kill." Snowpaw nibbled on the rest of his meal.

"I had to practice tree climbing again today, Lizardbelly said I'm really getting good at it. I managed to stay off the ground and jump between six trees today," she said animatedly.

Snowpaw purred. It seemed like they both had a good day. He finished his meal and cleaned his face. He glanced around the clearing, Meltwater, Starnose, and Mistshade, who had been made a warrior three moons ago, were grouped together sharing tongues. Rainwhisker was chatting with Littletail nearby.

Specklepelt was watching her two kits play beside the nursery. They were three moons old now. Snaketail lay nearby watching them with narrowed eyes. He was always such a suspicious cat, but when Specklepelt had their kits, he only seemed to get worse, always staying by her side and only talking when necessary. *I guess he's just protective of his mate and kits,* Snowpaw thought drowsily.

Emberpaw followed his gaze and muttered, "fluff-brain."

"Why is he always glaring at everyone? It's like he doesn't trust his own clanmates." Snowpaw flicked an ear in his direction.

"I don't know, but he's always been like that," answered Emberpaw thoughtfully. "But I try and stay away and do what he says. I don't want to be on his bad side." Emberpaw shuddered at the thought and Snowpaw nodded in agreement.

Sleetstar and Flameclaw were talking with heads bent together in hushed voices. Snowpaw saw Sleetstar beckon Lizardbelly, Littletail, Oneclaw, Sunpelt, and Charfur toward them. *I wonder what he's discussing with the senior warriors,* Snowpaw thought to himself.

He looked over at his sister contentedly lying beside him. He began to groom his own fur, eyes closed, as he tried to soak up what was left of today's sun. The wind was picking up and clouds were forming across the sky, the stars would be covered tonight.

"Let's head into our nests for the night before this storm breaks," said Snowpaw. Emberpaw agreed and they stood and crawled into their nests. The den was warm and Flowerpaw was already sound asleep.

Snowpaw circled in his nest until it felt comfortable and cosy. He settled down and closed his eyes. Sleep drifted in on a cool leaf fall breeze and took over his mind in darkness.

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Snowpaw woke to the sound of rain slashing at the leatherwood leaves of their den. The wind howled through the trees, their branches creaking and groaning. He curled his tail tighter over his nose, and tried to go back to sleep. He didn't want to train today. The storm sounded positively horrible. He felt his sister stir in her nest beside him. Snowpaw peaked open an eye. She was curled tightly in her nest avoiding the cold wind rustling the leaves, but Flowerpaw's nest was already empty. *She must have gone out on the dawn patrol, poor soul.*

Snowpaw stretched reluctantly, trying not to wake Emberpaw. He stuck his nose out of the den entrance, and immediately it was battered by cold wind and rain. He pulled his face back into the warm dry den and shook the rain off his muzzle. He sighed. But they did need the rain. The forest had seemed dry and dusty for a long while.

Snowpaw pushed the leaves aside with a front paw to try and shelter himself as he looked around the clearing. It was pretty empty, but Cloudpaw was racing back into the medicine cat den. Robintalon, Starnose, Meltwater, and Littletail were hurrying towards the bramble tunnel. Snowpaw guessed they were a hunting patrol, but he wasn't sure how much they would catch in this relentless downpour.

He saw Charfur step out from the warriors' den and hurry over. "You can stay inside until the storm lets up. Tell Emberpaw too, Lizardbelly said she doesn't want to turn into a fish with all this rain," he said amused.

"Thank StarClan," said Snowpaw, relieved. Charfur shook out his pelt and ran back across the clearing. He slipped back into the warriors' den, his grey tail disappearing between the branches.

Snowpaw turned and prodded his sister in the side. She groaned

and turned over. He poked her again, harder this time. She flicked out a paw and caught his ear.

"Hey!" he gasped.

"That's what you get for waking me up!" she said annoyed. " I was having a really great dream, I was climbing the trees high into the clouds." Emberpaw turned back over and Snowpaw narrowed his amber eyes at her.

He poked her side again. "Wake up!" he hissed. Emberpaw turned and quickly cuffed him over the ear again, playfully this time and he wrestled her into the ground.

Emberpaw scrabbled her sheathed hind paws against his belly, but Snowpaw's greater weight kept her pinned to the ground. She stopped and went limp, and Snowpaw let up a little. He realized his mistake as she mmediately slithered from under his grip and leaped to her paws to face him. Snowpaw whipped around and battered at her muzzle, but Emberpaw ducked and nipped lightly at his hind legs. Snowpaw fell to the ground, unbalanced. Emberpaw looked down at him.

"Gotcha!"

Snowpaw rolled his eyes, "I let you win."

"I don't think so! I was too quick for you," she insisted.

"Was not!" he huffed in protest. He could beat her any day in a real fight. "Anyway, did you hear was Lizardbelly said?" Snowpaw asked, changing the subject.

"No, what did she say?" Emberpaw sat and licked a paw, running it over her face.

"That she doesn't want to turn into a fish with all this rain. So we've got the day off!"

"That sounds just like her," Emberpaw laughed.

Snowpaw dropped his head into his nest and lay staring up at the

blowing leaves of their den. He closed his eyes and listened to the forest creaking under the weight of the storm.

His ears pricked as a thin wail drifted in on the wind. "Did you hear that?" he asked his littermate.

She looked over at him. "Hear what?"

"It sounded like a cat yelling out in the storm." He listened harder, but didn't hear it again. She looked at him with her head tipped to one side, confused.

"I didn't hear anything. Stupid furball," she teased sleepily.

Snowpaw shrugged and let his head fall on his paws. *I must have been imagining it,* he thought. He closed his eyes, the sound of rain starting to soothe him to sleep.

Then the thin little wail sounded again! Snowpaw was sure he heard it. He bolted upright, ears pricked, and Emberpaw stared at him.

"What's wrong?"

"I heard it again, it sounded like a kit!"

Snowpaw stepped out of the warm apprentices' den and was immediately soaked, the rain pelting him harshly. The clearing was deserted now, everyone taking shelter where they could find it. He saw Badgerclaw race through the entrance tunnel with Flowerpaw hard on his heels. Then came Flameclaw and Sunpelt. *They must have been the dawn patrol,* he thought as Flowerpaw pelted past him into the safety of their den.

"What is he doing out there?" he heard Flowerpaw ask her sister. "He's going to catch a cold standing around like that!"

Emberpaw muttered something in return, but he didn't catch it. He was straining hard to hear where the mewling was coming from. What is it was one of Specklepelt's kits?

He heard it again, it was coming from somewhere above the

nursery. Emberpaw and Flowerpaw stepped gingerly out behind him.

"Is it a kit? Did you hear it again?" Flowerpaw asked cautiously.

"Yes," Snowpaw replied quickly. "It came from somewhere up there." He pointed with his tail to the top of the gully behind the nursery.

"Well what are we waiting for? Let's make sure it's not Eaglekit or Leafkit!" Flowerpaw rushed away, tail streaming behind her as she pelted through the entrance tunnel. Snowpaw glanced quickly at Emberpaw and they both ran as quick as they could behind her.

The wind and rain tugged at their fur, plastering it to their sides and making them look as skinny as an underfed fox. The trees were bent in the wind, leaves swirling around violently. Snowpaw pushed on as they rounded the brambles that surrounded the camp. He paused to sniff the air, but the rain drowned out any scent left in the forest.

"I can't see anything!" Emberpaw yowled above the hissing rain. The downpour was so forceful that it created a thin mist as it bounced off the leaf-strewn ground. Snowpaw couldn't see much either; his eyes were screwed up to keep the water out.

Flowerpaw was sniffing around some holly bushes, but came up empty pawed. She looked absolutely crushed. "I can't scent anything!"

But Snowpaw heard the wail again, a little louder this time, coming from under a bracken patch blowing vehemently in the gale. The other two apprentices pricked their ears; they must have heard it too. Snowpaw started forward towards the bracken and nosed around its roots.

"Specklepelt?" came a little voice yelling from inside. "Mother! Help us!"

Emberpaw and Flowerpaw brusquely pushed the stalks aside and there were both of Specklepelt's kits! They were huddled together;

their little bodies were soaked to the skin. Leafkit's wide green eyes were staring up at them in fear.

"Help us please! We only wanted to see outside the camp! But then the rain started to pour harder and we couldn't get home," she whimpered. They were huddled together trying to stay warm, but they were both shivering violently. Eaglekit didn't look so good, his ears were flat and his eyes wouldn't open when his littermate poked him.

"Eaglekit, wake up! Flowerpaw, Snowpaw, and Emberpaw are here, they can bring us home," she whined, when her brother didn't move.

"How long have you been out here?" Emberpaw demanded.

"I don't know." Leafkit just curled up beside her brother, helpless.

Flowerpaw began to rub Eaglekit with her paws, trying to warm him up. "Come on," she whispered to him. She rubbed harder and Snowpaw looked at him unsure of what to do. *I feel so helpless!*

Eaglekit finally began to stir; his amber eyes peaked out, just little slits against the rain. He lifted his head and coughed weakly.

"We need to get them home now," Flowerpaw demanded. "They need to be warmed in their nest. Snowpaw carry Leafkit, and Emberpaw, run back to camp and tell Moonbeam what has happened here."

Emberpaw spun on her heels and raced back to camp. Snowpaw looked down at the pitiful bundle at his feet. Flowerpaw already had Eaglekit dangling from her jaws.

"Come on!" she called through her teeth as they gripped the little tom's brown and white striped fur.

Snowpaw stooped and grasped Leafkit's mottled scruff in his teeth, and they both hurried back to the entrance tunnel.

"Ow!" Leafkit squeaked as she bumped against Snowpaw's legs.

"Hush," he mumbled. "We're taking you home to your warm dry den."

As the two apprentices bundled the kits into the camp, Moonbeam raced out of his den with a mouthful of herbs and across the clearing towards them.

"Take them to the nursery now!" he demanded roughly.

Specklepelt was snoring, but woke with a jolt as all six cats bustled into the nursery. Her ears pricked with worry and she let out a gasp.

"My kits! What has happened to them?" She was frantic, panic sounding in her mew. She hurried forward and took Eaglekit from Flowerpaw. She settled him between her paws and started to lick his fur backwards. He mewled weakly in protest.

"Do what Specklepelt is doing," Moonbeam motioned to Snowpaw. He placed Leafkit on the ground gently and began to lick her pelt dry.

After a few heartbeats, the two kits were stirring and protesting, sounding livelier than before. Moonbeam was chewing up some round, bright green leaves. He had a little pile of thin needle-like leaves beside him.

"Good, they're warming up," muttered Moonbeam, still chewing.

"What happened?" Specklepelt blurted out. "Where were you?" Her light grey pelt was fluffed up and she was looking down at her kits, fury brewing in her yellow eyes. They cowered under her harsh gaze.

"It's okay," Moonbeam mewed gently. "They're safe now, Specklepelt." He bent down and touched his nose to the two kit's muzzles. He pushed the chewed up leaves to Eaglekit. "Eat these," he encouraged. "They'll make you feel better."

"What are you feeding him?" Specklepelt eyed the medicine cat suspiciously. Eaglekit lapped up the herbs and spat it back out immediately.

"He has a fever, Specklepelt. I want to make sure he rests and gets better." He pushed what was left of the chewed leaves back to Eaglekit. "Eat these now and swallow them."

"But they taste bad!" he squeaked.

"I know, but they will help you grow big and strong."

"I want to get strong too!" piped Leafkit, as her brother reluctantly swallowed the herbs.

"Here," Moonbeam shook a few of the needle leaves off its thin branch. "These are for you." Leafkit licked them up eagerly.

"These taste really good!" she purred.

"That was thyme for shock, and to calm her nerves," Moonbeam reassured the worried queen. "They might make her tired." Emberpaw and Flowerpaw were crowding around the cave entrance behind the broad shouldered medicine cat.

"What happened?" Specklepelt asked her kits again, more gently this time. Their eyes were beginning to droop with tiredness.

Snowpaw spoke up. "I was lying in the apprentices' den with Emberpaw and we heard them crying out from somewhere through the rain. Flowerpaw lead us out into the forest and we found them huddling in a bundle of old ferns."

Specklepelt eyed him. "How was it that only you heard them?" she asked suspiciously.

Snowpaw shrunk under her gaze and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know why, but I'm glad we did hear them." He lifted his muzzle, daring her to challenge him. After all, they had saved her kits!

"We wanted to explore the forest," Leafkit mumbled sleepily. "The camp is so boring, but then the rain started to pour so fast and we got stuck..." she trailed off and her head slumped sleepily.

"It was my idea," Eaglekit mewed weakly. "I told Leafkit we would

be brave to explore the forest."

Specklepelt gathered her two kits into their nest and curled around them protectively. "You shouldn't have left the camp, let alone our den in this weather!" she scolded them. More gently she added, "you're still young kits, it's not brave to leave the camp, it's mouse-brained."

Moonbeam glanced at Emberpaw quickly, then ushered her and Flowerpaw out of the den and guided Snowpaw out behind them. "Let them rest. It was a good job you found them, Snowpaw. Thank you. And it was smart to run back and get me. If they had stayed out much longer they could have become very sick. Eaglekit's fever will be better soon."

Snowpaw nodded tiredly. He was glad they were able to save the two kits. They were the future of the Clan. He padded along behind his two denmates and they piled into their den. Flowerpaw flopped down into her nest and began to lick her fur dry.

"I'm going to be soaked for a moon!" she sighed. "Going out on the dawn patrol was pointless, no cat from any Clan would be out in this weather."

"No kidding! But I guess we have to do what our mentors say." Emberpaw was licking a paw to clean her ears.

Snowpaw was exhausted, cold, and tired. His legs were shaking, but he managed to clean and dry his fur. He settled in his nest and instantly fell into a dark black sleep. No dreams disturbed him.

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A quiet rustling woke Snowpaw. He rolled over and groggily opened his eyes. Flowerpaw was still sleeping but Emberpaw was sitting up in her nest. The rain was hissing lightly now, dying down to a thin drizzle.

"What are you doing?" he asked his sister.

"Lizardbelly asked me to change the elders' bedding. I guess the rain had seeped into Stiffwhisker's nest. She said the rain had stopped

enough and that Moonbeam had some spare moss in his den," she muttered, rolling her eyes.

"What was that you said earlier about listening to what our mentors say?" Snowpaw twitched his whiskers. Emberpaw shoved him with her paw.

She padded out of the den cautiously and crossed the clearing to the cedar tree. Snowpaw figured it must be evening. There were still grey rain clouds that covered the sky, but it was a lot darker than before. There was a cool breeze that swirled the last golden and red leaves to the ground. Leaf bare was just around the corner.

Snowpaw stretched and snuck out of the den. They were going to have to fortify all the dens soon because they were getting drafty as they moulted their leafy cover. He looked around and noticed Robintalon, Badgerclaw, and Flameclaw talking near the warriors' den. Snaketail was carrying a shrew over to the nursery for his mate.

Snaketail must have noticed Snowpaw lingering half in, half out of the apprentices' den, because he turned and narrowed his eyes at him. Snowpaw's pelt trembled under his clanmate's unforgiving glare. He wondered what he was thinking. The three apprentices had just saved his kits! *Snaketail should be grateful,* he muttered darkly to himself.

Snowpaw shook out his fur and put it to the back of his mind. He padded lightly across the clearing when he saw his mentor appear from the bare hawthorn bush and beckon him with his tail. He skipped around and over the biggest puddles and stopped in front of Charfur.

"I heard what you did today," he purred. "That was very brave of you and your denmates to go out in the storm and find Specklepelt's kits." Charfur's bright green eyes shone with pride.

"It was nothing really. I'm just happy we were awake to hear it. When we brought them home, Specklepelt was snoring!"

Charfur rolled his eyes. "I'm glad I've got an apprentice with a

brain! At least someone has to have one."

"What do you mean?" Snowpaw asked confused.

"It doesn't matter," Charfur replied quickly. "In any case, Sleetstar knows and he is impressed. The whole Clan is lucky to have you three."

"Thanks," Snowpaw scuffed a paw on the ground, unsure of what to say. He wasn't usually tongue-tied. *Maybe Sleetstar will make me a warrior sooner than later.*

"We're going to go out on border patrol," Charfur continued, back to business. "It's almost sun down, and now that the rain has stopped we might be able to catch a little prey on the way back." He tipped his head toward the bramble entrance where Yellowleaf and Mistshade were waiting for them. Mistshade was impatiently flicking her tail.

They hurried over to them and slipped out into the forest. Everything was dark and dripping after the storm. A thin drizzle misted in between the towering trunks and made it hard for Snowpaw to see more than a fox length in front of him.

"I can't see through any of this," he sighed, frustrated. "How are we supposed to catch anything?"

Charfur was padding along just ahead of him, Mistshade in the lead, hurrying forward and Yellowleaf was taking up the rear. She caught up to him and nuzzled his shoulder affectionately.

"We are a border patrol, so if we do catch anything it'll only be a bonus. There's a hunting patrol out now too," she reasoned. Snowpaw flattened his ears as they brushed against bracken, bent by the weight of the water. He loved his mother but hated how she always treated him like a kit.

"I know." Snowpaw stomped quickly ahead, passing his mentor and crowding behind Mistshade. She glanced back at him and sniffed as she turned back around and trotted toward the RubyClan border.

Snowpaw knew the forest well now, all the paths and hidden

hollows, which trees were best for climbing, and where prey liked to hide. He felt like a real EmeraldClan cat and he was ready to be a warrior.

"Slow down, both of you," Charfur called after them. "We're nearing the border."

Snowpaw slowed reluctantly to let Charfur and Yellowleaf catch up. Mistshade was a couple tail lengths ahead marking a stump at the border.

Yellowleaf stepped gingerly ahead and sniffed at a bush. "No sign of RubyClan. Hopefully they stick to their side of the border this leaf bare."

Mistshade nodded. "If they do cross it, they've got more warriors than ever to fight." Her light grey fur was fluffed up. "I'll be ready." Her mew was hard with determination. She was still a young warrior and hadn't yet had the taste of battle other than the occasional border skirmish.

"Right! I'll be ready too." Snowpaw felt the same. He knew that EmeraldClan couldn't be beat. They were strong and hardy, and with Snowpaw training hard, soon no one would be able to beat him. *I will be the best any Clan has ever known,* he vowed seriously to himself.

The patrol finished marking the border. No stray scents were found except for a stale fox stench, but it had passed days ago and neither Charfur nor Yellowleaf thought there was any danger.

They crawled in through the bramble tunnel and Yellowleaf ran her tail along Snowpaw's spine as she passed on her way to the warriors' den. Lizardbelly rushed up to meet Charfur.

"How was the border, any RubyClan cats?" she asked. Snowpaw watched them pad away together to the fresh kill pile to deposit Charfur's catch. He had managed to catch a pigeon, surprisingly plump for the season. He had noticed that those two were always together these days. *They must be great friends,* he thought.

Mistshade stepped past, brushing him aside, and disrupted his train of thought. She looked proud with a scrawny squirrel clamped in her jaws. *It's going to be all fur and no meat,* he thought wryly.

He himself had snatched up two tiny mice, but at least it was something. His belly growled embarrassingly loud. He hadn't eaten all day. This would be Snowpaw's first leaf bare without his mother. Already his clanmates seemed scrawnier than normal, their pelts were dull, when normally they were thick and sleek.

He took his mice over to the apprentices' den. He tucked into one, ripping at its meagre offering. He devoured it hungrily, licking his lips. It was hardly satisfying.

Emberpaw soon walked over and sunk down beside him, bracken and moss sticking to her pelt. She sighed heavily, but looked up gratefully as Snowpaw nudged the other mouse towards her.

"The elders are as cranky as ever. Swiftear nearly bit my head off. Even Whitemoss was grumpy."

"I think the weather may be getting to them. Their old creaky bones always ache when it rains," Snowpaw tried to brighten his sister's mood.

She purred tiredly and tucked into the mouse Snowpaw had caught. "Mmm," she mumbled. "It's still warm." She crunched on the bones as Snowpaw began to clean his face.

Lizardbelly and Charfur were sharing tongues at the edge of the clearing. Cloudpaw padded out from under the roots of the Great Maple and over to the elders' den and Snaketail's tail was disappearing into the nursery. Rainwhisker was padding after Meltwater, a distant look in his eyes. Snowpaw didn't know what had gotten into that silly tom, but he seemed so distracted lately.

Robintalon was sitting next to her father Flameclaw and they were talking quietly about something, their ginger pelts bright in the dying light. They looked so similar, even in the way their muscles rippled under their pelts. Snowpaw thought she would be a really great warrior one day, just like Flameclaw.

Despite the weather and the storm, EmeraldClanseemed happy. Leaf bare would be hard, but Snowpaw was ready to face it and dothe best for his Clan.

Chapter 5

Badgerclaw hurried Flowerpaw over to the entrance tunnel. Flameclaw, Oneclaw, Sunpelt, Snaketail, Rainwhisker, and Meltwater were milling around the bramble barrier. Moonbeam pressed Cloudpaw towards the group, but she never had any sense of urgency. Charfur and Lizardbelly padded towards them. She whispered something in his ear and he purred, twining their tails together. Snowpaw was pacing anxiously beside Emberpaw. The elders were grumbling nearby about the cold.

"This is no weather to be out in," muttered Swiftear, his golden pelt fluffed up against the cold.

"Gatherings are important, fluff-brain," Stiffwhisker teased him affectionately. Whitemoss was crouched close by, sharing in their heat.

"Don't you want to hear the rest of Blue-eye's story about the time he swam across the lake?" Whitemoss asked. Snowpaw purred as they continued to bicker.

The moon floated above the treetops, bright and full. Tonight was the gathering. Snowpaw's breath billowed up from his muzzle. Leaf bare was here now, frost coated the bare branches and snow drifted up, muzzle height in some places.

The snow had come quickly. One night it began and fell for three days, never stopping. Snowpaw hated going on patrol and as sudden as the snow came, the prey hid in their holes. Now the thick white snow covered everything Snowpaw could see. The sky was clear tonight and the moon shone down and everything glittered.

"I wish we could go," squeaked a voice drifting from the nursery. Snowpaw saw bright amber eyes peaking between the brambles. Suddenly little green ones glared from beside them. He purred. Eaglekit had recovered from his fever quickly and they were getting

big now. In a few moons they would be apprentices.

Sleetstar slipped down from his den and hurried through the snow towards the cats that were ready to go. He flicked his tail for them to follow him as he disappeared through the tunnel. Robintalon hurried over from the warriors' den, late as usual.

Snowpaw bounded out into the frosty forest, the trunks sparkling under the moonlight. His clanmates burst forward, weaving though the undergrowth. Snow flew up from their paws as they hurried on towards the Ravine. Snowpaw pushed harder, his long legs taking him past Emberpaw and Flowerpaw. He caught up to Oneclaw, his muscles bunching under his brown pelt. Oneclaw looked over briefly and nodded.

Their breath rose like mist as they ran on, past the border markers and to the lip of the Ravine. Sleetstar slowed and raised his tail for his Clan to halt. Snowpaw pressed up towards the edge of the Ravine and looked down. RubyClan and SapphireClan were there already; they were late this time. Soft meows rose up towards his ears. The snow muffled every sound.

At Sleetstar's signal, they flowed down into the Ravine, using the rocks and ledges to leap to the bottom. It was slippery in the snow and Snowpaw lost his footing, rolling down and landing with a thud against a small boulder. He shook his head to clear the stars from his eyes.

His clanmates purred in laughter as they passed, but Emberpaw hurried forward. She sniffed his pelt and dusted snow off with her paw.

"Are you okay?" she fretted.

"Yeah," he groaned. Snowpaw stood and flicked the rest of the snow off. His back was sore where it had smashed into the rock. "It was just a mouse-brained mistake."

They gathered with the rest of their Clan, Sunpelt glanced at Snowpaw, but seeing he was okay, turned and walked up to a group of warriors. Pelts were brushing each other, everyone stayed close

to retain the heat. Clan boundaries were non-existent tonight. It was cold and there was the full moon truce.

"Let's go over there," Emberpaw was looking at a group of apprentices, from both of the other Clans.

"Alright."

They joined the group. Barkpaw and Petalpaw of SapphireClan were with Hazelpaw of RubyClan. Barkpaw was telling a story, boasting loudly. Snowpaw sat next to Petalpaw. She was a pretty young cat, the cream markings on her black fur sparkled in the full moon light. Hazelpaw blinked kindly at both Snowpaw and Emberpaw.

"And then I swooped down the bank and shoved the fox so hard it fell into the river! The ice cracked under it and that mangy flea-pelt splashed away into the lake." Barkpaw was waving his paws about wildly as he told his story. Petalpaw shrunk nervously as one swiped above her head.

"I can't believe you fought it off on your own!" Hazelpaw admired.

"On your own?" Snowpaw was incredulous. "That's a wad of mouse-fluff."

Barkpaw looked over at him and narrowed his eyes. "I'm almost a warrior, of course I fought it off on my own." He turned a front paw so his claws glinted in the moonlight and licked it thoughtfully. Petalpaw gasped.

"You're as small as a squirrel," Snowpaw argued, his hackles rising threateningly. The smaller brown apprentice's fur spiked along his spine.

"It's not worth it," Emberpaw whispered to him, at the same time Cindertail came over.

"Barkpaw, behave yourself." His blue eyes flashed with anger. He led his apprentice away, muttering.

"You're brave," mewed Hazelpaw. "I wouldn't want to fight a cat

who chased off a fox on his own." Her pretty yellow eyes were wide with admiration. Snowpaw's heart skipped a beat.

"Anyone could tell he was lying," he muttered embarrassed.

"Really!" Emberpaw emphasised. "There's no way a full grown warrior could even chase one off on their own. Right Petalpaw?"

"R-right," she stuttered. Emberpaw nudged per playfully and began telling the story of how the three EmeraldClan apprentices saved the kits. Flowerpaw walked over and sat to listen, Hazelpaw and Petalpaw were enthralled by the tale.

Snowpaw let his gaze wander the clearing. Sleetstar and Wingstar were seated on the taller rock and Tawnystar was standing on the one just below. Their deputies were sitting at the base of the rocks; Flameclaw was talking to Watershine and Foxpath. Groups of warriors were wandering about sharing stories. Snowpaw caught Honeymoth's eye and she nodded. She was a warrior now, but he missed talking to her at gatherings.

Wingstar yowled from where she was standing. "Let the gathering begin!"

Everyone turned their eyes towards the leaders, huddling closer together. Snowpaw heard Emberpaw whisper, "I'll finish my story after," to the other apprentices.

"Our prey runs well despite the snow that fell so quickly," she began. "There has been no threat from twolegs or their dogs, hopefully they will continue to stay away all leaf bare." Murmurs of agreement rose from the crowd. The RubyClan cats sat up prouder as their leader spoke.

"We have a new warrior as well. We welcome Birdfeather as a full RubyClan warrior." Everyone raised their voices to the sky as they called out her new name. She was a popular cat among the Clans.

"Birdfeather! Birdfeather!" Snowpaw joined in on the cheer. He tried to look for the new warrior, spotting her light grey ears sitting closer to the rock.

Wingstar dipped her head and stepped back. Tawnystar stood from the lower rock, raising her voice to be heard. "We as well have prey running bountifully. Leaf bare has not weakened us at all. However the lake is beginning to freeze again."

An anxious wail rose above the rest of the din. "Will the wolves come back?" Yowls rose up into the frosty air and pelts bristled. Snowpaw looked at Charfur sitting nearby. He shuffled closer to Lizardbelly. Snowpaw had heard the story of the few wolves attacking SapphireClan last leaf bare. They had crossed the lake when it froze solid. He had been a small kit then, unaware of the danger.

"I hope not," another cried. "I have kits!"

Tawnystar stood commandingly above all the cats. "Last leaf bare we lost good warriors. But we scared those mangy wolves off. They were starving and skinny. They won't be back any time soon!" Her warriors stood and yowled in agreement. Scarpelt and Mothwhisker were the loudest.

Sleetstar stepped forward last, and waited for the cries to die down. Snowpaw thought he looked so strong standing on the Great Rock, his broad shoulders silhouetted in the moonlight. *One day I'll be up there,* he vowed.

"The snow has been a pain, but under the shelter of the trees, it's not so bad. Our prey is running alright and we are still well fed."

Snowpaw noticed that all of the leaders had said that, but every cat in the Ravine was thin and their pelts were dull. There was no way that prey was running bountifully in any territory. Snowpaw knew first hand. In the last few days since the snowfall more and more of his clanmates were going to bed hungry.

"We have some very brave apprentices among us tonight," he continued. Snowpaw pricked his ears. "They rescued two of our kits during the rainstorm. They took initiative and I am proud to have them in our Clan. I know they will make great warriors one day."

Snowpaw's ears burned and Emberpaw fidgeted beside him.

Flowerpaw, however, sat up straight and proud as their leader called out their names.

"Flowerpaw, Snowpaw, and Emberpaw." All the cats' eyes turned to look upon them, glowing in the darkness. Charfur looked proud and Sunpelt was bragging to nearby warriors. Snaketail was crouched at the rear of the group. Snowpaw could feel his glare hot on his back.

The leaders finished their accounts and then leaped down into the throng of cats below. The cats split up into their respective Clans. Hazelpaw nodded apologetically as she left to head back to RubyClan.

"Finish your story next time!" she called over her shoulder. Emberpaw meowed a good-bye and padded next to her mentor. Rainwhisker and Meltwater were headed towards the cliff face, tails entwined.

"Want to share a nest with me tonight?" Snowpaw overheard Rainwhisker ask the beautiful she-cat.

She purred in response leaning into his sandy brown and white fur. "Of course. It'll be warmer that way." She had a glint in her eye

Snowpaw shook his head and turned to follow the group out of the hollow. They climbed back over the lip of the ravine and followed their trail back home through the snow. The moon was sinking towards the treetops when they emerged back in camp. Snowpaw yawned loudly.

"Tomorrow you can sleep in for a while. You'll be tired after tonight," said Charfur, looking tired himself. He padded after Lizardbelly, and she flicked her tail across his muzzle affectionately. Snowpaw nodded and followed Flowerpaw and Emberpaw to bed.

"Hazelpaw, and Petalpaw were loving my story," Emberpaw uttered sleepily. "Next time I've got to make sure Barkpaw hears it. He must have been jealous when we were singled out at the gathering."

Flowerpaw giggled as she curled up in her nest. "Barkpaw is full of himself. Too bad his brother Talonpaw wasn't there tonight. He's

quiet, but he's nice."

Snowpaw agreed silently as he curled into hisnest. They settled in and all three were quickly snoring.

Chapter 6

"Let all cats join together beneath the Great Maple for a Clan meeting!"

Snowpaw jerked his head up, woken up from his deep sleep. Emberpaw was rousing drowsily from her nest, and Flowerpaw was grooming her fur. The dawn sun turned the sky pink as Snowpaw gathered with his clanmates.

"What's this about?" Robintalon grumbled. "It's so early."

"You should have been waking anyway," chided Flameclaw, who sat beside her. "With such little daylight, we need to use it while we can." Robintalon merely flicked her tail crossly in response.

Littletail, Meltwater, Mistshade, and Yellowleaf stepped slowly out of the warriors' den and gathered close together under the maple.

"It's chilly!" exclaimed Meltwater, her breath billowing like a cloud.

"I hope this leaf bare isn't here as long as the last one." Littletail fluffed his black pelt out. His short tail looked like a spiky black pinecone.

Lizardbelly and Charfur sat close together. He had his muzzle resting on the top of her head. *They look happy,* Snowpaw thought with a little smile. *I wonder if I'll ever have that.*

Snowpaw had recently realized that they were so friendly towards each other, not because they were good friends, but because they were mates. He watched them almost jealously, as they twined their tails together.

Sleetstar was standing on the maple branch impatiently pacing back and forth as he waited for the last of his Clan to gather beneath him. Snaketail slipped out of the nursery, telling his mate and kits

to stay inside and keep warm.

"The senior warriors and I were talking recently," Sleetstar began. "Prey is scarce and we need all we can get." Snowpaw wondered where this was going. Were they going to steal prey from another Clan? That would go against the warrior code.

"We know this already," growled Swiftear, interrupting their leader. Sleetstar glared at the elder.

"I know it's cold this morning but bear with me." He paused for dramatic effect. "We have been talking about exploring the Rocky Hills." He stood tall and let the cats gasp and murmur amongst themselves.

"But they're dangerous!" called Meltwater as she shuddered.

"Remember the cougar?" fretted Whitemoss. "We don't want to have that happen again."

"I know, I remember," Sleetstar spoke over the noise. Snowpaw recalled the story Whitemoss had told them as kits of the time a huge cougar attacked the RubyClan camp. The monster cat was ten times the size of the strongest warrior and a pale tan colour with teeth as sharp as thorns. The three Clans had to join together to fight it off, and many cats had been injured and even killed. Everyone quieted down, except for a few mutterings amongst the elders.

"But that is now in the past," their leader persisted. "And if RubyClan can hunt there, so can we!"

"Yeah we're just as strong as them!" called Badgerclaw loudly.

"And we can climb trees, so boulders would be easy," added Oneclaw.

Flameclaw glanced up at his leader uncertainly. Maybe he didn't agree with what Sleetstar was saying. But Snowpaw knew that it was the deputy's duty to support his leader with tooth and claw.

"This leaf bare has been a long, cold one so far, and it won't be over

for another three moons at least. The Rocky Hills are a part of our territory, why not make use of them?" He looked around, his eyes daring a cat to challenge his decision. But Snowpaw noticed, most cats were agreeing with him, their pelts bristling with excitement.

"When will we go?" asked Flameclaw, still uncertain.

"Who will you send?" spoke up Snaketail from the back.

Sleetstar puffed out his chest proudly and yowled, "we will go today! We will explore the Rocky Hills and develop a new way of bringing prey home! We will never go hungry."

Caterwauls of agreement rose up, Sunpelt, Oneclaw, and Lizardbelly sounded above the rest.

"We'll beat RubyClan at their own game!" Badgerclaw rose to his hind paws and swiped at the air as if facing an enemy.

"I can't wait to see their faces when we tell them next gathering," Snowpaw said excitedly.

"They won't even know what to say!" Emberpaw agreed. "Do you think we'll be sent out to explore?" she asked excitedly.

"I didn't even think of that!" He pondered the idea and became hopeful. "Charfur," he shouted for his mentor's attention. "Can we go?"

Charfur turned and shrugged. "It's going to be dangerous and I think Sleetstar has already decided. Maybe next time. There's going to be a lot of patrols going I imagine." He blinked at Snowpaw apologetically. Snowpaw sighed, but he understood. He was sure Sleetstar would only send the most experienced warriors for this important first expedition.

"I want Oneclaw, Sunpelt, Lizardbelly, Charfur, and Yellowleaf," Sleetstar continued. "You will be the first patrol. You all have a lot of experience, but you'll need to be cautious. We can't have any injuries during leaf bare."

Yellowleaf looked up surprised at being called. Sunpelt edged his

way over to his mate and nuzzled her lovingly. "This will be so exciting! I'm glad we're going together."

Oneclaw was nodding and Lizardbelly had her tail curled in delight. Charfur dipped his head to his leader. Snowpaw was so excited that his parents and mentor were going to be the first to explore the rocky terrain. If anyone could find prey, they could!

"Do you think this is wise? It's leaf bare, who knows what's out there."

Snowpaw looked up and Emberpaw pricked her ears. Moonbeam's pelt was fluffed up in nervousness.

"I know these are good warriors, but maybe that's why they shouldn't go. We've always survived leaf bare; this year will be no different. We should wait until the snow is gone before we go up there," the medicine cat reasoned.

"Sunpelt can do anything!" Snowpaw spoke up. How dare he question their leader or the warriors he chose? Sleetstar flicked an ear.

"I appreciate your concern, Moonbeam. But we've been discussing it for days, and I know these warriors are ready. We need prey and we need strength."

Moonbeam sat back down and dipped his head, but his fur did not flatten. *What's spooking him I wonder? Is there something he's not telling us?* Snowpaw hoped there had been no omens, but surely if there had been he would have told Sleetstar.

He noticed Yellowleaf's ears fold back with worry as she too noticed their medicine cat's concern. Sunpelt leaned into her and whispered words of comfort. Oneclaw sat up straighter.

"Oneclaw, you'll lead the patrol. You're strong and experienced and I trust you to keep everyone safe."

"I will Sleetstar," he nodded.

The leader leaped down from the Great Maple and everyone

dispersed. Meltwater and Rainwhisker followed Littletail on patrol. Whitemoss and Stiffwhisker, were sniffing at what was left of the fresh kill pile from last night. Snowpaw ran up to Charfur, excitement was buzzing in his paws.

"You'll tell me everything right?"

"Of course," Charfur purred. "I'll make sure you can come along next time. It'll be good experience for you."

"Thank you!" Snowpaw dipped his head. He loved his mentor. He had learned so much from him.

"Now go see Sunpelt and Yellowleaf before we go. And today you can ask Flameclaw if there's anything you can do for the Clan while I'm gone."

"Tell Emberpaw to tag along with you," added Lizardbelly. "We'll be back tonight."

Snowpaw scampered off towards Yellowleaf and Sunpelt. Emberpaw was already there.

"You'll tell me all about it? You better be careful though!" Emberpaw purred loudly. Yellowleaf nuzzled her daughter affectionately. Sunpelt ran his tail along her spine.

"We'll all look out for each other, don't worry." Sunpelt's eyes were sparkling with excitement, like he was a young cat again. Snowpaw was excited for them and for the clan, as they learned together and expanded their territory.

The group of five cats stepped out of the camp and into the forest. There was excitement buzzing through the air around the camp. There was a skip in Swiftear's step that Snowpaw hadn't ever seen before.

"You two!" Flameclaw called to Snowpaw and his sister. Emberpaw looked up sharply, as he padded over. "I'm getting Snaketail to lead a hunting patrol. I want you both to join him as well as Starnose. When you get back, you can join Badgerclaw and Flowerpaw at the training hill."

"Yes, Flameclaw," Snowpaw nodded to his deputy.

"Okay!" Emberpaw piped up from behind.

Snaketail seemingly stepped out of the shadows, even though there weren't any in the early morning light. It sent a shiver down Snowpaw's spine and he had to try hard to keep his fur from fluffing up. Snaketail always had such a nasty scowl.

Starnose padded up to them, a refreshingly positive personality compared to brown tabby tom.

"Are you two ready?" she asked politely.

"Ready as I'll ever be." Emberpaw skipped towards the brambles that guarded the camp. Snow was drifting up against the barrier in the farthest corners.

"Wait!" Snaketail growled. Emberpaw halted mid stride. "I'm leading this patrol, so you will follow my instructions. Have you not learned respect?"

Starnose shook her head. "Snaketail be gentle, she was just excited. Everyone's excited right now."

He muttered something and Snowpaw stuck out his tongue at him behind his back. Emberpaw noticed and giggled.

Snowpaw stepped out into the forest at the end of the patrol. The sun sparkled on the snow, and the pale pink sky had turned to a bright forget-me-not blue. Fluffy clouds drifted lazily across. It was a cold morning, but the bright crisp days were the best days in Snowpaw's opinion.

"Not a good day for tracking prey," Snaketail grumbled. "It's too cold to smell anything." His words contradicted Snowpaw's thoughts and he rolled his eyes.

Snaketail had ordered them to split up, Starnose and Emberpaw heading towards the SapphireClan border, while Snaketail took Snowpaw towards the meadow. They followed the stream, frozen solid in the leaf bare moons that had passed.

Snowpaw opened his jaws to taste the air. It was fresh and cold, but there was a faint scent of sparrow on the breeze. Snowpaw pricked his ears and heard it chirping nearby. Snaketail didn't seem to notice it as he padded on.

Snowpaw took his opportunity and veered off the path towards the sound. It was perched on a low limb of a cedar tree. He crouched low trying to balance evenly. He didn't want any paws to sink into the snow. He kept his tail low, but off the ground and he silently snuck forward.

The bird continued chirping loudly. Snowpaw crept towards it soundlessly.

He was under the branch now, tensing his hind legs, getting ready to leap into the air. He hesitated, and then jumped as high as he could! His claws snagged into the birds tail and he pulled it to the ground, snapping its neck with a nip and cutting off its warning call.

Snowpaw dug a hole in the snow to bury it when Snaketail erupted from a bush beside him. His eyes were shining with fury.

"What's going on?" he snarled. Snowpaw was taken aback.

"I caught a sparrow! I was just burying it." Snowpaw's eyes were wide with innocence.

"Why weren't you following me? Didn't you hear what I told Emberpaw about respect? What's wrong with you young cats?"

What's wrong isn't us, it's you! Snowpaw thought angrily, but he held his tongue. He stared back at the senior warrior with furrowed brows. Snowpaw took a steadying breath.

"I heard the sparrow, I caught the sparrow. Isn't that what a hunting patrol is supposed to do? Hunt?"

"You want to talk back to me?" Snaketail's claws glinted in the sun as he dug them into the snow. He towered over Snowpaw, snarling in his face. They were the same height, but Snowpaw couldn't help but shrink under his gaze.

"N-no," he stuttered, all confidence shattered. Would he really attack a clanmate? That was against the warrior code, but Snowpaw wasn't entirely sure what Snaketail was capable of.

Snaketail lingered for a moment more, and then huffed angrily. "Follow me this time." He stalked away through the trees.

They met back up with Starnose and Emberpaw a while later and headed home. Starnose had caught a finch and Emberpaw carried two voles in her jaws. Snaketail had expertly stalked a rabbit, which was rare to find in their dense forest. Snowpaw was unlucky for the rest of the hunt and only had the sparrow to carry home. Either way it was an impressive catch between the four of them. The rabbit would feed many.

Flameclaw looked amazed to see such a huge fresh kill pile in leaf bare. "Well done all of you! Your clanmates will be very happy tonight," he praised them. Snowpaw stood a little straighter. He watched Snaketail slink off again towards the nursery. Soon his kits would be apprenticed and then maybe he wouldn't be such a pain.

"Good catch!" Flowerpaw padded up behind her friends. Snowpaw couldn't help but puff out his chest proudly.

"Thanks!" Emberpaw said gratefully. "We're going to have a feast tonight."

"Yeah, once that patrol comes back, we're going to have so much to celebrate!" Flowerpaw added.

Badgerclaw came padding over to the apprentices. His eyes were narrowed as he said, "I'm taking all three of you out to train today because your mentors aren't here." He looked at Snowpaw and Emberpaw with an expression he couldn't read.

"Great!" Flowerpaw bounced up. As she landed snow dusted up into the air and coated her fur with white flakes. "Brrr!" She shook out her pelt. Her mentor rolled his eyes and began to walk away.

Snowpaw and Emberpaw tagged along with Flowerpaw as she followed her short-tempered mentor out to the training hill.

Flowerpaw was trotting behind closely, gazing fondly at her mentor.

"I wonder if he's as grumpy with her as he is with everyone else," Emberpaw whispered in her brother's ear.

"I think he's grumpy with everyone," returned Snowpaw. "But at least he's not as bad as Snaketail."

When they arrived at the training hill, Badgerclaw swept the snow off the top and made a clearing. Emberpaw tried to help, but as she shoved a particularly big snow drift it knocked a branch above her and down came a huge heap of snow right on her head!

"Emberpaw! Emberpaw, where did you go?" Snowpaw called out laughing hysterically. She popped her head out of the white mound and shook the snow off.

"That's not funny Snowpaw!"

"Is too! Right Flowerpaw?" Snowpaw looked over and saw amusement sparkling in her eyes as she tried not to smile. Badgerclaw had a frown on his face, but his twitching whiskers gave him away.

"Poor Emberpaw," Flowerpaw fussed as she hurried over to help her out of the cold snow.

"Thanks Flowerpaw." Emberpaw narrowed her eyes and spat at her brother.

"Alright enough now," Badgerclaw called as the two had cleaned Emberpaw up. "You'll need to warm up Emberpaw, so how about we practice two on one battling?"

Snowpaw's ears pricked and his pelt tingled. *This is what I'm good at!*

He crouched menacingly and Flowerpaw copied him, both facing Emberpaw. His sister looked frightened, but determined. She stood watching their eyes, but Snowpaw knew not to give away his next move with his line of sight.

Flowerpaw tensed beside him and leaped at Emberpaw, paws splayed wide. Emberpaw was ready for her and she ducked under her forepaws and snuck under her belly. She thrust upward and unbalanced the cream coloured she-cat. She landed heavily on her side.

While she was distracted Snowpaw had crept behind Emberpaw and nipped lightly at her hind legs.

"Hey!" Emberpaw spun around and batted Snowpaw's muzzle with sheathed paws. Her blows were hard, but not enough to stun him. He backed away quickly as Flowerpaw recovered. She leaped at her denmate and landed on Emberpaw's back. She gripped her paws around her as tight as she could without claws and cling to the white she-cat's pelt like a burr.

Snowpaw saw his chance as Emberpaw tried to nip at Flowerpaw's black forepaws that held on tight. He slipped forward, quick as a snake, and battered his littermate's muzzle with a few well-aimed blows.

Emberpaw yowled in fury. She couldn't hold her own against two cats that were as well trained as her. But Snowpaw knew he would have a hard time too when it was his turn.

But Emberpaw didn't give up. She rolled over, squashing the bigger apprentice flat on her back. Snowpaw heard a puff of air and Flowerpaw let go, allowing Emberpaw to leap out of her grasp. She turned and pinned Flowerpaw down into the snow, exposing her belly.

Emberpaw pummelled her belly with hind paws, but Snowpaw quickly knocked her off with a hard shove. Emberpaw lost her balance and tumbled into Badgerclaw. He leaped backwards, surprise pricking his black and brown pelt.

Snowpaw crouched, ready to leap again and Flowerpaw stood shakily, trying to catch her breath.

"That's enough," Badgerclaw said forcefully. Snowpaw looked up reluctantly; he could have kept practicing, but he knew not to

disobey the older warrior.

"All three of you did well," he praised them. "Emberpaw, you held your own very well considering, these two didn't let up." Emberpaw nodded breathlessly.

"Flowerpaw, I'm proud of how quick you were to leap on her back." His apprentice glowed with happiness, suddenly standing up straighter. "But you need to work on your shoulder strength. You should have been able to push Emberpaw off you when you were pinned down."

"Okay Badgerclaw. I want to be able to do well in any battle, I know I still have lots to learn." Flowerpaw nodded appreciatively, and Snowpaw noticed her mentor's eyes looked gently upon her.

"And Snowpaw." Snowpaw turned to look at Badgerclaw as he heard his name. "You were quick and strong, and you knew how to help Flowerpaw when she needed it. You will be a great warrior, but know that too much confidence can be a vice."

"Yes Badgerclaw, thank you." Snowpaw dipped his head respectfully. He knew he was strong, but he didn't think himself too confident. *I just know what I'm doing. It's not my fault if I'm better than them both.*

Badgerclaw had Flowerpaw and Snowpaw both take a turn on the defence. Flowerpaw had been surprisingly vicious, but she couldn't win, and Snowpaw had more trouble than he thought which left him frustrated.

By the time they were done and back in the gully the sun was starting to sink towards the horizon. The sky began to darken and fade from pink, to purple, to dark blue. Dark clouds were quickly forming on the horizon, promising more snow. Snowpaw gazed up between the bare tree branches and sighed happily. Despite Snaketail, he had a wonderful day. And soon the patrol that went to the Rocky Hills would be home with their report.

He lay half in, half out of the apprentices' den, and tucked his paws under himself to keep them warm. Emberpaw was inside washing.

There were groups of cats milling about the edge of the clearing, waiting impatiently for the patrol to return. Sleetstar was sitting on the Great Maple, Robintalon, Meltwater, Rainwhisker, and Mistshade all had their heads bent, talking quickly.

Specklepelt was watching Leafkit and Eaglekit play in the snow as they sunk up to their muzzles. Snowpaw was amused by their endless energy. Snaketail crouched nearby. Littletail and Flameclaw were pacing back and forth, casting nervous glances at the entrance tunnel. Moonbeam was nowhere to be seen. Soon a gentle snow began to fall.

Finally Snowpaw heard a rustle as cats filed slowly into the camp. He saw Flameclaw tense and heard Specklepelt let out a surprised squeak. She ushered her kits into the safety of the nursery. Something was wrong. There was no excitement pulsing through the camp, but a shocked silence blanketed them like a heavy snowfall.

"Are they back?" he heard Emberpaw ask as shetumbled over him and into the clearing. Snowpaw turned and looked. He felt hispelt rise in horror. He stood numbly and stumbled a few steps forward to standbeside his littermate.

Chapter 7

A bone-chilling shriek tore through the air like lightning. Snowpaw knew it was Emberpaw, but he couldn't look at her. His eyes were wide, staring at the sight in front of him.

Oneclaw had entered the camp first, followed by Lizardbelly and Charfur. Each of them had a soggy mound of fur draped over them. One was pale with red staining the ruffled fur. The other was ginger, no longer bright, but dull and matted.

They placed the broken bodies down gently in the centre of the clearing. Sleetstar raced forward, followed closely by Moonbeam and Flameclaw. No other cats dared to approach, frozen in horror.

"What happened?" There was grief and anger in their leader's voice.

"We tried to save them," whimpered one.

"But they fell. The snow was so deep, and we didn't know where we were stepping," another voice trailed off.

Still Snowpaw could not stop staring. *My parents. This can't be real. Yellowleaf and Sunpelt are dead!* Grief gripped his heart like claws sharp as thorns. He couldn't speak.

Emberpaw wailed again, her agony piercing him deep into his bones. He wanted to protect his sister, he had to, but he couldn't move.

"StarClan why?" choked a cat nearby.

"Sleetstar, we should have let it be," came a deeper, softer voice. Snowpaw saw a glint of silver fur in his peripheral vision, as Moonbeam crouched in mourning. "We were warned..." he trailed off quietly.

There was a warning from StarClan? And they went anyway?

Snowpaw let out a whimper but it caught in his throat. It felt dry, as if he had swallowed a mouthful of sand. He felt Emberpaw crouching beside him; her body felt small and frail like a kit. Voices crowded his ears, but they all sounded far away. All he could hear was a deafening roar and his heart pounding in his ears louder than thunder.

"No..." he choked out. "No, no, no, no..."

His eyes started to blur as he stared at their bodies and everything around him became hazy. He sat with a thump unable to stand any longer. His legs just couldn't hold him. His head spun, tossing him dizzily around.

As if all at once, the weight of the world crashed down on Snowpaw. His parents were dead. He tore his gaze away, as anger swept him up into it's ferocious current. He couldn't be here anymore. His clanmates' emotions were too thick in the air, clouding and choking his lungs.

He raced out of the camp as fast as his legs could carry him. Thorns tugged at his fur as he tore blindly through the forest, ripping the fur from his sides, but he didn't care. He just knew he had to get away.

It's not real, it's not real, it's not real.

He kept running.

It's not real, it's just a cruel dream. I'll wake up soon.

"Why would you do this to me?" he yowled as he glanced up through the trees. Snow clouds were partially covering the stars. "StarClan! How could you?" His amber eyes were streaming from the cold, his paws numb as they pounded the frozen white ground.

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth as he ran faster and faster. His muscles ached, but all he could think about was getting far away from the scent of death surrounding his camp.

Snowpaw came to a painful halt as he smashed head first into a large rock emerging from the snow. His ears rang and his head

pounded. He crumpled to the ground, exhausted now. No anger was left, only a deep sorrow.

He didn't know where he was, but the sky was dark and stars intermittently dotted the deep indigo expanse. They started to spin slowly. The stench of death lingered in his nostrils and Emberpaw's grief stricken wail echoed in his head over and over again.

He shook his head trying to get away, but it kept repeating. He curled his tail tightly over his face and held his ears down with his paws.

Yellowleaf and Sunpelt are dead!

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He woke as someone grasped his scruff in their jaws. He dangled helplessly like a newborn kit. Only he wasn't the size of a newborn kit and his hind legs and tail dragged lifelessly in the snow. He opened his eyes weakly as the forest slid around him, but he still felt dizzy. Snowpaw closed his eyes again and let himself be taken home.

Snowpaw lay feebly on the ground as the warrior grunted and placed him down gently. He curled up again and kept his eyes closed. The cold snow covered ground seeped into his fur and he shivered, but kept his eyes shut tight.

He could vaguely hear his clanmates wandering around, scuffing the snow with dragging paws. It was quiet and cold and he drifted once more into an uneasy sleep.

A soft voice tickled his ear fur.

"...nowpaw. Snowpaw. Snowpaw wake up."

He stirred and lifted his head slowly. Snowpaw blinked open his eyes painfully. They had been frosted over with ice crystals.

I'm so tired and my limbs feel like waterlogged tree trunks, he thought to himself. Charfur was standing above him with a soft unhappy look in his eyes.

"Come on, stand up. Come with me."

Snowpaw stood up numbly. He couldn't feel his ears or his nose. The camp around him was dark with twilight.

Why am I so tired? He wondered with a foggy mind.

Snowpaw stumbled after Charfur, keeping his grey pelt in his sight. Suddenly he turned, fixing him with a piercing green gaze.

"Snowpaw," he began. "You need to listen to me. Everything will be okay, but you're going to need to take some time to grieve."

Grieve? What's going on?

"Your sister is laying with your parents now, why don't you join her? Keep her safe and warm."

My parents... That's right. The young cat closed his eyes and took a breath. He didn't want to deal with any of this; he didn't know if he was capable of dealing with it. *I'm so lost,* he thought feebly. Slowly he opened his eyes.

Snowpaw looked around the camp clearing. Flameclaw was crouched with Cloudpaw at the edge of the clearing near the Great Maple. Whitemoss, Swiftear, and Stiffwhisker were huddling together under the boughs of the cedar tree they nested under. Lizardbelly and Oneclaw were crouched next to each other, not touching, as they stared at the ground. Mistshade was comforting Starnose as she sighed with sorrow.

Then his eyes wandered over two heaps of fur, glistening in the moonlight. They looked peaceful, as if asleep, but Snowpaw didn't see their flanks rising and falling with life. He noticed Emberpaw with her nose buried in their fur, whimpering like a kit. He didn't know what had happened in the Rocky Hills. Snowpaw wasn't even sure if he wanted to know. But as he looked at his sister he felt an overwhelming need to protect her. Snowpaw wandered over haltingly, and ran his tail over Emberpaw's spine.

The frost had coated Sunpelt and Yellowleaf's pelts overnight and they sparkled like they were already cats from StarClan. Snowpaw

stooped beside his sister, but she didn't look up. He nuzzled into his mother's fur. It smelled of frost and death, not like the warm sweet smell he remembered.

The sun gradually began to rise and the birds began to chirp as the stars disappeared from the sky. He didn't want the morning to come; he wanted to lay longer with Yellowleaf and Sunpelt. He knew that soon they would be taken away from him forever.

Starnose came over and nudged Emberpaw and Snowpaw to their feet. Emberpaw stood reluctantly, her gaze cloudy.

"It's time to get some sleep my dears." Snowpaw didn't budge. She nosed him again, a little more forcefully this time. He just squeezed his eyes and buried his muzzle deeper into his mother's cold pelt.

"Snowpaw," she said gently. "It's time now, you must let them go."

"Snowpaw," his sister echoed quietly.

Suddenly he stood, grief and anger giving him a wavering strength.

"NO!" he yelled as loud as he could. "I won't let you take them! How could you?" he turned and faced Charfur, Lizardbelly, and Oneclaw who were huddled together. "How could you let them die?"

Lizardbelly flinched and Charfur looked away. Oneclaw remained calm and steadily held his gaze.

"You were there! You were supposed to help each other! But you let them die. It wasn't their time to go." Snowpaw glanced over to his parents lying lifeless on the ground. "And I still needed them," he added sadly. "I still need you!" he yowled at them, full of heartache and rage.

Birds that were perched in the trees above the camp fluttered into the sky in alarm. Emberpaw stared at him through wet eyes. She sniffled and tried to press her pelt against his. But Snowpaw pulled away and his littermate recoiled as if he had struck her.

He instantly regretted it, but he was so overcome with emotions he couldn't take it back. He just stood with his fur fluffed out in fury

and his ears burning.

The musty smell of herbs washed over him as Moonbeam padded toward him. He lowered his head to look into Snowpaw's eyes. Moonbeam's own ice blue gaze penetrated his mind and he took a reluctant steadying breath.

"It was their time Snowpaw. StarClan has a reason for everything. They are there to take care of your parents now. You must trust in them."

"How can I trust StarClan when they took my kin away from me?" he asked desperately. "I heard you say that they warned you about the Rocky Hills. But you didn't say anything when they left." His rage subsided and was gradually replaced with dull emptiness.

"I know Snowpaw, but sometimes there just isn't anything that can be done. Your fate is laid out for you as soon as you come into this world. You can trust them, you must. You've lost a lot today, but you can only grow and become stronger from here." He glanced over worriedly at Emberpaw who stood near, listening.

Snowpaw nodded absently. He felt tired again,like all his energy had drained through his paws into the frozen earth. Heneeded to sleep. Immediately Snowpaw turned and apologized to Emberpaw softlyand she nuzzled his cheek in forgiveness. He couldn't look as the elders tooktheir parents bodies away into the forest to be buried. His tail drooped anddragged through the snow as Starnose guided them both into the apprentices' dento sleep.

Chapter 8

Snowpaw woke and groggily blinked his eyes. The sunlight splashed around him as it shone through the den. The pink evening sky dappled the ground and turned his sister's pelt the same colour as Yellowleaf's. She looked just like her sometimes. He inhaled sharply, the sadness still raw in his heart.

She stirred, but didn't wake. Snowpaw didn't want to leave the den. He didn't want to see anyone or feel anything. He closed his eyes, but he slept fitfully as confusing dreams crowded his mind.

Crows and ravens swooped down on him menacingly, cawing loudly and abrasively. They pecked at him, tearing small, but painful wounds in his skin. Suddenly they flew off in a flurry of wings and Snowpaw was surrounded by and empty black void. He whimpered in fear as the blackness pressed down around him, thick and cold.

Snowpaw slept for a whole day waking only a few times. He was weary and cold and his mind was hazy and unfocused. The young apprentice was plagued by terrible dreams and felt as if he didn't even sleep at all. Emberpaw lay slumbering beside him the whole time, as still as a rock.

When he awoke two mornings later he stood stiffly and shook out his pelt. Making up his mind to try his best not to sleep all day, he stepped out into the clearing. Cats were milling around the camp murmuring quietly to each other. Whitemoss and Stiffwhisker gave Snowpaw such a look of pity that he shrunk away from their gaze. Flowerpaw avoided eye contact as she cleared out the elders' bedding.

Flameclaw was sending Badgerclaw, Robintalon, Meltwater, and Rainwhisker out on patrol. Their pelts looked dull as they padded slowly past Snowpaw. Specklepelt's kits were quiet and wide-eyed as if even they knew something was wrong. Mistshade and Cloudpaw were sharing tongues near the medicine den and

Sleetstar was lying on a limb of the Great Maple distractedly staring at the ground. The whole clan was feeling the loss.

Snowpaw stepped forward crossing the clearing reluctantly and peeked his head into the warriors' den. Lizardbelly and Starnose were still asleep, but Charfur was sitting in his nest grooming his pelt. He looked up in surprise as Snowpaw nosed his way in.

"I'm sorry for what I said yesterday," he whispered, so as not to wake the sleeping warriors. "I'm still upset, but I'm sure you did all you could to... to save them," he choked out. The apprentice looked down, but when Charfur let out an emotional throaty purr, relief washed over him.

"Thank you Snowpaw, that means so much to me. I'm so sorry and I wish I could have done something more." His mentor sighed; he stood and shooed Snowpaw out of the den. Charfur glanced back quickly at Lizardbelly, then followed him out into the cold leaf bare air.

"Are you okay to go out?" Charfur asked hesitantly. "I can give you more time to grieve, but I want to take you hunting. We've got to keep moving forward with your training despite everything that happened." Charfur tilted his head towards the entrance tunnel.

Snowpaw knew his mentor was right, but his heart wasn't in it. But as he thought back to this morning he realized that going back to his nest wouldn't do him any good. He hunched his shoulders, but didn't answer.

"Come on, Snowpaw, you can do anything, I know you're a strong young cat." Charfur pushed.

"Alright," he slowly agreed.

Snowpaw followed his mentor out into the dense forest. Charfur was being very kind to him by walking slowly to let him keep up, but he just wasn't able to focus. His paws were heavy and they scuffed the snow as he walked. He knew he had to work hard, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it.

Charfur offered him the first kill. He had told him to stalk a robin chirping on the root of a tree. Snowpaw did his best to crouch and focus on catching the little bird. His eyes burned with tiredness. As he got closer he misjudged the leap, landing short, and the bird flew away in a flurry of flapping wings.

He hoped Charfur wasn't too disappointed when he turned back to him empty-pawed. But he surprisingly didn't look angry; instead he had a look of understanding softening his features.

"Come on Snowpaw, sit with me."

Snowpaw followed a little confused as they sat on the root where the robin had been perched moments before. Charfur sat silently beside him and Snowpaw looked up at his mentor expectantly. *Spit it out,* he muttered in his head.

"I know what this feels like," Charfur began slowly. Snowpaw didn't answer he just waited for him to continue.

"This feeling of complete loss. Like nothing's going to be the same, like the world has failed you, turned against you and buried you deep in the ground." Charfur's fur spiked along his spine and his eyes focused on something far away as he remembered something Snowpaw didn't know about. He shook his head as if to clear it and continued.

"When I was really young, just getting ready to become an apprentice actually, I lost my father," he said quietly. He didn't look at the younger cat beside him. "He... he was a great warrior, but he was killed when the clans came together to attack the cougar that was terrorizing RubyClan."

Snowpaw felt reproachful. *That's not the same!* He narrowed his eyes and tried to keep his mouth shut, but anger bubbled to the surface.

"You have no idea what this is like!" his voice rose in irritation. Charfur looked suddenly at him, surprise lighting his eyes. "You lost your father, sure, but you still had your mother at least! You still had family, you still had someone to love and to be reassured by!" His skin felt hot under his fur.

"Don't forget you still have Emberpaw-" Charfur began, but Snowpaw interrupted him.

"It's just not the same thing!" he yowled and stood facing his mentor. "This is completely different! Your father died like a real warrior, fighting for his Clan. Both of my parents didn't need to die such pointless deaths."

"I know," Charfur looked away, his eyes clouding.

"Did you even find more territory to hunt in?" Snowpaw asked sceptically, remembering the whole point of their mission.

"Not really," the grey warrior began hesitantly. "There really was too much snow, we barely knew where we were placing our paws. It was too hard to find new hunting grounds up there."

Charfur's ears drooped sadly and his pelt dulled. Snowpaw felt hollow. He hated it, but he couldn't help feeling bad for Charfur. He tried to push the feeling away; he was mad at him! But his anger fizzled out as his mentor looked at him, his green eyes were swimming with wretchedness.

"I've failed you," the grey warrior whispered. He looked down at the ground and scuffed the snow distractedly off the tree root.

Snowpaw felt horrified that his mentor could feel like that. He had always seemed so strong to him, and to see him so broken choked Snowpaw, and he was unable to speak. *You didn't fail me! I've failed you!*

Charfur stood and began to pad slowly back to camp. Snowpaw opened his mouth to call him back, but nothing came out. He wanted to scream above the treetops, but only breath escaped his lips. Charfur disappeared behind a bush and Snowpaw was left alone and cold.

He stared at the ground and narrowed his eyes. *Why am I such a failure? I should have been there! I should have been able to save Yellowleaf and Sunpelt!* He clawed at the bark in frustration, splinters spraying in the air.

He trotted angrily into the forest to clear his head. He felt so useless. Snowpaw tried his best to catch something to bring back to the gully. He had to feel like he was able to provide, able to do anything for his clanmates.

Eventually he managed to catch a sparrow. It was thin and felt like a meagre addition to the fresh kill pile, but at least it was something. He hurried back to camp; snow clouds were pressing down on him. They were thick with snow, and he felt there was a storm coming.

When he emerged from the entrance tunnel, he looked around for his mentor. Flameclaw was curled around Starnose protectively, his bright ginger fur fluffed to keep her warm. Flowerpaw's nose was burrowed into her mother's fur and her older siblings, Rainwhisker and Robintalon, were huddled nearby. Normally chatty and bubbly, even Robintalon was silent, still shocked by recent events.

He saw Whitemoss's white tail tip disappear under the cedar tree as they hunkered down for the snowstorm. Sleetstar and Moonbeam were talking up on the Great Maple. Its bare branches rattled as the wind howled through the trees. Oneclaw sat alone in the clearing, staring into the darkening forest around them.

He spotted Charfur finally, curled under the outer branches of the warriors' den. His mate Lizardbelly was crouched facing him, whispering something to him. Snowpaw figured she was trying to comfort the depressed warrior. Her black and white shoulders were tensed.

Snowpaw stepped over to them cautiously; he didn't know if he would be welcome. But he had to apologize to his mentor. He crept closer and heard Lizardbelly's words.

"You're a great cat, everyone knows that. No one blames you Charfur, even Snowpaw. He's just upset, you remember what that felt like."

She twitched an ear and stopped as Snowpaw came into view. She dipped her head and looked knowingly at her mate. Lizardbelly escaped into the warriors' den and left the two of them facing each

other uncertainly. Snowpaw dropped the sparrow and nudged it towards Charfur.

"I caught this."

"That's good Snowpaw, thank you."

There was an awkward silence as Snowpaw groped for words to express how he felt.

"It's for you. I thought you'd be hungry, you haven't eaten."

"You keep it for yourself, you haven't eaten either." Charfur looked away and curled his paws tighter under his belly.

"I'm not really hungry..." Snowpaw twitched an ear awkwardly and glanced at his paws. Charfur sighed at his words.

"But you've got to keep your strength up. A young cat like you is more valuable to this Clan."

Frustration surged up into his throat and Snowpaw burst out, "I am not! You're easily more valuable. I haven't even learned half of what you know. I'm just a dumb apprentice."

Charfur stared at him, taken aback.

"I'm sorry Charfur, I was wrong before, I shouldn't have said all that. I'm really grateful that you're my mentor and I don't want you to feel the way I do right now. It's horrible. But I'll get better in time I hope, and I'll keep working hard. I've got to be the best cat I can be to honour both Yellowleaf and Sunpelt. And to honour you."

Charfur looked so hopeful and proud, as he curled his tail in delight. "You never cease to amaze me!" he said loudly. "Thank you Snowpaw. I will always be proud that you're my apprentice, I feel lucky that I'm able to teach you all I know."

Snowpaw felt like a weight was lifted off his shoulders. He felt immensely better and even though his heart was still broken, it felt like a small piece had mended itself.

He padded a little lighter over to the apprentices' den. But as soon as he entered, he felt the sourness rolling off his sister as she lay brooding in her nest. It was dark inside and Snowpaw entered gingerly, not sure what to say.

"Hi Emberpaw," he greeted quietly.

"Hi," she grunted back.

Snowpaw pushed his nest closer to hers and cuddled up next to her. She was warm and soft and he tried to comfort her. She turned her head away and closed her eyes as if to shut out the world.

"What'll we do now?" she asked after a while. "I don't want to even leave my nest let alone hunt and train to become a warrior." Snowpaw saw the sorrow in her eyes and murmured sympathetically.

"Me neither." He sighed and rolled over onto his back. "I feel like we've lost everything."

"We have." Emberpaw turned and curled her back against her brother. "We'll never see them again. And for what? I heard they didn't even find anything in the Rocky Hills."

"It's true," Snowpaw approached the subject gingerly. "I asked Charfur about it, he said they couldn't find new hunting grounds."

Emberpaw snorted and began picking at her nest.

"I knew it." She began picking at the frozenground with her claws. "I hate everyone. Sleetstar was such a mouse-brain toeven send them there. It's all his fault." She yawned and tucked her nose underher paw. Snowpaw couldn't help but worry. *She'staking this so hard,* he thought. He had his outburst of anger, butEmberpaw's seemed to still be smouldering under the surface.

Chapter 9

Three moons had passed since the horrible accident. Leafpaw and Eaglepaw had been training for two moons now and Flowertail was made a warrior at last. The den seemed crowded recently, especially because the two younger cats were so full of energy. At least at the moment they were out with their mentors, Flameclaw and Starnose.

He remembered their naming ceremony. They and the whole clan were so excited as their new names were called. It was the first good news since the Rocky Hills and the coming of new leaf helped lift everyone's hearts. Eaglepaw quickly warmed up to his mentor Starnose, but Leafpaw seemed a little nervous. Snowpaw had congratulated them, but wasn't excited to have them badger him all day and to share a den.

They're so annoying, he thought with a smirk. He remembered when he was young and enthusiastic like them. These days nothing really seemed to get him excited like that anymore, he just wanted to work hard and get through every day. Emberpaw, however, seemed worse, only talking when she had to and bringing back meagre prey offerings. He could tell Lizardbelly was pretty fed up with her.

One afternoon they had come back into the camp yelling at each other over StarClan knows what. Snowpaw was so surprised at his sister's ferocity, as was the rest of the clan. Everyone but him and Flowertail had avoided her for a while.

The days now were warmer as leaf bare came to an end. The snow was melting and the ground was soggy under-paw. Some early buds were beginning to show on the undergrowth and some new leaf flowers were budding.

Snowpaw breathed in their scent deeply as he padded after his mentor. They were on dawn patrol. Rainwhisker and Oneclaw joined them. The forest smelled fresh and new as the earth began to warm.

A small stream chattered along beside them, swollen with snowmelt. It seemed Snowpaw had to shake each paw after every step or else he feared he would grow webbed feet! *This is no weather for a warrior.*

They arrived at the SapphireClan border and everything seemed in place. But as they padded farther along, Snowpaw noticed something odd. The newly grown grass was crushed on their side of the border and he thought he could smell the strong stench of SapphireClan, but it was hard to tell. He didn't want to be wrong so he called his mentor back.

"I think I smell SapphireClan. But the border is right there and I can't tell if they crossed it or not."

Charfur bent to sniff the grass and narrowed his eyes. "Oh it's them alright. And it looks like they've been stealing prey."

Snowpaw was taken aback; surely they wouldn't be so bold!

"Oneclaw! Rainwhisker! Come see this," Charfur called them over.

They padded quickly over, examined the ground, and agreed with the grey warrior. There were tufts of squirrel fur caught on a blade of grass and crimson blood spattered the ground. Ears flat back, they all glared over the border. It was early, they sun was barely pushing the stars away. If they had stolen prey, it mustn't have been long ago.

"It smells fresh," observed Oneclaw.

"We should attack them now!" yowled Rainwhisker. Snowpaw had to agree. How could they steal prey so soon after leaf bare!

"We should tell Sleetstar first," reasoned Charfur. "He can decide what to do."

Oneclaw grunted in agreement and they raced back to camp to make their report. Snowpaw was excited, but maybe for the wrong reason. He wanted to finally experience his first battle and put his training to the test.

Emberpaw padded up to him as he stood waiting while the two senior warriors reported to their leader. Rainwhisker paced nearby and Meltwater quickly stepped up to see what was wrong.

"What's going on?" Emberpaw asked dully as if she didn't really care.

"We found SapphireClan scent on our side of the border on patrol. I think they stole prey."

"Mmm," she commented. Snowpaw noticed her glaring at Sleetstar as he talked to his senior warriors. *Who put nettles in her nest?* Lately she always seemed like something was wrong, but every time Snowpaw asked, she shrugged her shoulders and walked away. She was so nonchalant about every single thing it almost annoyed him.

Sleetstar leaped up onto the Great Maple and called out to the cats left in the camp. "Let all cats join together beneath the Great Maple for a clan meeting!"

Snowpaw and Rainwhisker joined the rest of their patrol and they sat together. Emberpaw sat where she had stood, looking around the clearing. Moonbeam and Cloudpaw strolled from their den and sat among the roots of the tree. Lizardbelly hurried to finish the mouse she was munching on; she swallowed the last mouthful and came to sit next to Charfur. Flowertail and Mistshade emerged from the warriors' den and the elders hobbled slowly out from under the cedar tree. Robintalon came racing in from the dirtplace tunnel yelling, "wait for me!"

She stumbled to a halt beside Snowpaw and sat down breathless. "Whoa," she exclaimed to no one in particular, "I need to get into better shape!"

Rainwhisker cuffed his sister over the ear and she nudged him back playfully. Snowpaw wished he still had that kind of relationship with his sister. He wanted to protect her and be close to her again, but she had been pushing everyone away.

"Our dawn patrol reported that SapphireClan has crossed our border and stolen prey!" Sleetstar shouted as soon as everyone was seated.

Cries of outrage followed his announcement.

"How dare they?" Robintalon stood suddenly with her fur on end.

"They're thieves!" Rainwhisker was thrashing his tail side to side.

Sleetstar held up his tail for silence, but Swiftear kept muttering about how mouse-hearted and cowardly they were.

"I'm going to send a second patrol and make sure no one else has crossed. I will keep an eye on that border, and if we catch anyone make sure to let them know they will be punished."

Yowls of agreement rose up and Snowpaw joined in. He couldn't stand the idea that someone would be so cowardly as to steal prey that wasn't theirs. He wanted to teach those flea-pelts a lesson.

Sleetstar called out to the cats that would be on the second patrol; Oneclaw to lead them back to the patch of grass, Robintalon, Mistshade, and Flowertail. They departed, but Snowpaw wished he were going with them. Lizardbelly called to her apprentice and they left into the forest as well.

Charfur and Snowpaw caught up with them as they headed for the training hill. The forest bloomed around them, but Snowpaw's fur was on edge, like a storm was brewing. But the sky above was blue and cloudless, promising a clear, warm day.

"I want to practice some fighting moves. Especially with SapphireClan acting the way they are," said Lizardbelly as they reached the hill. Charfur nodded in agreement and Snowblaze heard his sister mutter something under her breath. He looked over at her, but she wouldn't return his gaze.

Their mentors had them practicing faking each other out. Snowpaw knew he was good at this. He never betrayed where he was going to attack with his eyes. They crouched down and circled each other menacingly as their mentors observed.

Snowpaw glanced down at Emberpaw's feet, but quickly leaped high over her head. She had noticed his eyes and feigned to leap. But she quickly sank to the ground and Snowpaw sailed over her

head, landing on the ground behind her. They both spun around, facing each other again.

"That was pretty good," mocked Emberpaw. Her eyes flashed and Snowpaw growled.

"I guess you know me better than I thought."

"I've been watching."

"Seems like that's all you do lately. Just watch. You never say or do anything."

Emberpaw crouched deeper and suddenly leaped for Snowpaw. He reared up to meet her and they crashed together with rage. Snowpaw's greater strength overpowered his sister and as their paws pummelled each other, Snowpaw gradually pushed her onto her back.

They collapsed onto the ground, Snowpaw pinning her in the mud. Emberpaw's eyes challenged his, their yellow depths filled with an emotion Snowpaw couldn't recognize.

Quick as a snake his littermate wiggled out from under his paws. Still on her back she kicked out with her hind paws and caught Snowpaw painfully on the jaw.

"Hey! That was uncalled for." He rubbed his sore jaw with a forepaw and barely ducked in time as Emberpaw leaped for his back. Snowpaw winced as a claw caught his ear and tore a nick in the tip.

"Emberpaw!" yelled Lizardbelly from the side-lines. "That is enough."

The white, mud-covered apprentice whipped around and glared first at her mentor, then at her brother. His eyes grew wide with confusion. *What did I do wrong?*

"It's never enough," Emberpaw growled quietly. "I seethe with anger when I see how all of you have moved on, as if you have forgotten my parents. And you," she rounded on Snowpaw and he flinched.

"You are my brother! You're supposed to feel what I feel, but somehow you're *happy*." She spat out the last word like it tasted foul in her mouth.

"I-I haven't forgotten Emberpaw. I never could! I just realized that I still needed to provide for my Clan. That's still the most important thing."

"Why don't you feel like I do?" she snarled at him. Her claws glinted dully in the sun. Then quietly, and sadly, she whispered to herself, "why do I feel like this?"

Snowpaw's heart splintered as his broken sister turned with her tail drooping and sulked away into the undergrowth. His gaze followed her until her white tail tip disappeared into the fresh green leaf buds.

"Snowpaw," a soft voice called him out of his daze. The apprentice turned and saw both his mentor and his mate looking at him with something like pity in his eyes.

"It's not your fault," Charfur continued. "You're doing the right thing by moving on. The good of your Clan should be the greatest motivator in your life."

But Snowpaw was so worried about his sister that he couldn't help but wonder if he was doing the right thing. Should he feel better while she was clearly so miserable? But if she wouldn't accept his help, there wasn't much he could even do.

"She'll have to get over it in her own time," said Lizardbelly softly. However her eyes were hard. "But she's taking too long. Soon you'll both be warriors, but I worry about what she'll be capable of once she is one."

Lizardbelly's ominous words followed him home. When they returned the camp was buzzing with activity. Flameclaw and Starnose had their apprentices helping reinforce the bramble barrier with extra thorns and sapling branches. Rainwhisker was excitedly telling Meltwater what happened on patrol that morning.

The elders were gossiping amongst themselves about the rival Clan. Littletail, Badgerclaw, and Flowertail were talking animatedly as they devoured their evening meal. Snowpaw grabbed a mouse and a shrew for himself and Emberpaw and brought it over to their den to eat.

She was sharpening her claws on a thick branch that had fallen halfway down into the gully, crushing the barrier slightly where it had landed. He was glad she was back in camp and not wandering the forest.

"I brought you some fresh kill," he said as he dropped it on the ground.

"I'm not hungry, thanks." Emberpaw didn't turn around. Snowpaw grumbled. He was so frustrated with her. Why couldn't she just try? He had to try so hard every day to act like he wasn't still hurt, but she just didn't care! He knew she needed help, but she refused it every time.

He tucked into his meal and when he finished he brought the shrew and a finch over to the medicine cat den.

Moonbeam was inside organizing the herbs. It smelled green and tangy as he pawed at the freshly picked leaves. Cloudpaw must have been out gathering more.

"These are for you and Cloudpaw when she gets back." Snowpaw dropped off the fresh kill and dipped his head before backing out of their den. Moonbeam mumbled a 'thank you' and went back to work.

Eaglepaw and Leafpaw were gulping down their prey as Snowpaw wandered back to their den. The sun was below the horizon now and the sky was turning to a deep indigo. The moon was nearly full. There would be a gathering within the next few days. Snowpaw longed to go, he wanted to see the other apprentices closer to his age. He was tired of the two younger ones and his moody sister.

He nestled into his nest, and the two new apprentices chattering excitedly about the looming threat from SapphireClan lulled him to

sleep.

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A rustle sounded gently in Snowpaw's ear. It twitched quickly, but he had been awoken by the sound. He opened a bleary eye and saw a pale shape standing near the entrance to the den. He raised his head as Emberpaw began to pad out into the night.

"Hey!" he tried to call out to her quietly, so as not to wake the other apprentices. She turned her head reluctantly and didn't meet her brother's eyes.

"I'm just going out to make dirt," she responded quickly. But Snowblaze thought she sounded defensive and panicked. He knew she was lying to him. Recently she had been awake more and more in the middle of the night, tossing restlessly and sometimes leaving the den. He needed to know what was going on.

"I think I need to as well." He stood to follow her and her ears folded back warily. She backed out of the apprentices' den and Snowpaw followed. The cold night air hit his body forcefully after the cosy warmth of the den. He shivered, but continued on.

Emberpaw was walking stiffly towards the dirt place tunnel. They exited through it together and Emberpaw stopped abruptly.

"Listen, I think this is kind of a private thing. I'm going to go over there." She quickly scooted away around a patch of thick raspberry bushes. Snowpaw was left with his jaw clenched. He let out a low growl in frustration as she left him standing there. He wrinkled his nose to keep the smell out and waited patiently.

After a few more silent heartbeats, he became inpatient. He rounded the bushes, ready to give her a stern talking to when he realized that she had gone. He scraped the ground in frustration, leaving deep gouge marks in the earth.

"She's going to tell me what's wrong sooner or later," he muttered to himself. He hated the way she was acting, and he hated that he didn't know what was bothering his littermate. Frustrated with her

and himself, he wandered back into camp and settled into his nest.

He couldn't sleep, and he waited up for his sister, amber eyes glinting in the moonlight filtering through the leaves of the apprentices' den. Eventually his eyes fluttered closed, and there was still no sign of her. His dreams that night were disturbed with evil things that he couldn't quite see. A darkness surrounded him and he woke uneasily in the dawn light.

Emberpaw was sleeping in her nest when he did wake and relief washed over him. But he couldn't shake the need to know what she had been up to.

Chapter 10

"Attack!!"

The screech made Snowpaw's fur fluff up in fear. He whipped around, dropping his mouthful of vole, as Robintalon torn through the brambles that surrounded the camp. Her ginger fur was bristling.

Sleetstar bounded down from his perch and Specklepelt raced out from the warriors' den. Stiffwhisker and Swiftear, who were sunning themselves in the middle of the clearing, bolted upright and stared at Robintalon.

"Who's attacking?" Sleetstar demanded.

"SapphireClan! We were on border patrol and caught them on our side and they wouldn't back down!" she explained breathlessly. Her green eyes sparkled with the light of battle.

"Flameclaw! Who's around?" Sleetstar whipped his head around looking for his deputy, his tail lashing.

"I think he's out hunting," Snowpaw said quickly. "But I'm here, I'll go help!" He hoped Sleetstar would let him; this would be his first battle! *I'll show those mangy fish-eaters who they shouldn't mess with.*

"Okay, you and Specklepelt join Robintalon's patrol, and hurry! Anyone you see in the forest, take them with you."

Yes!

"Let's go!" yowled Robintalon as she turned and ran back through the tunnel. Snowpaw's amber eyes lit up with adrenaline. His heart pumped wildly as they sped through the forest. His strong muscles stretched and contracted as leaves whipped past his face.

He began to hear yowls echoing up ahead and he knew they were getting close. Robintalon rounded a tree and there were suddenly

cats wrestling and clawing each other with vicious determination.

Snowpaw froze, but quickly shook off his fear as Robintalon and Specklepelt leaped into battle. Oneclaw was lunging for the SapphireClan deputy Watershine. She escaped his claws and leaped on his back. Oneclaw quickly used his greater weight to drop to the ground and roll onto his back, squishing the young warrior. She yowled and writhed under him and they rolled away screeching.

Charfur and Littletail were tussling with Crumblerock and Sunfire. Sunfire's golden pelt was stained with red as blood gushed from a long scratch down hi flank. Snowpaw watched as Crumblerock nimbly avoided flashing teeth and reared up, catching Littletail with long claws. Nearby Snaketail chased a grey tom off into the enemy's territory yowling in fury as he followed him, his tail twice its normal size.

"Get! Off!" A furious voice came from his right. He turned his head and saw that Emberpaw was viciously tearing at Petalpaw's pelt with her hind legs as she shoved her face into the ground with her forepaws. Petalpaw was screeching in pain. "Get off me!" the SapphireClan apprenticed yowled again, but Emberpaw refused. Despite Petalpaw being from the enemy clan, Snowpaw took a step forward to help her.

Suddenly Snowpaw was knocked on his side and the breath was violently pushed from his lungs. As his vision cleared he looked up and saw Kestrelfur bearing down on him, her claws glinting in the weak sunlight. He scrambled to his paws and escaped a mouse-whisker from her forepaws slamming to the ground. He turned and, thinking quickly, bit down hard on her hind leg. The dark brown she-cat let out a yowl of rage.

"You mangy apprentice! I'll show you!" She shook him off and Snowpaw stumbled backward.

Flowertail raced up at that moment and slashed at Kestrelfur's ears. She took both cats by surprise. Regaining his composure Snowpaw reared up to claw at her muzzle. Together they drove her back to her territory, matching swipe for swipe. She howled in frustration, but then Kestrelfur turned and fled home.

"And stay out of our territory!" Snowpaw screamed after her. Satisfaction ran deep through his body. He turned to the cat standing beside him.

"Thanks!" he breathed. Flowertail simply nodded and jumped to help Robintalon fight off a strong dark tabby. He had her pinned against a tree trunk, her expression one of rage and fear. Snowpaw watched as Flowertail snuck up behind the tom and dragged him backwards with her claws fastened deep in his skin.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Snowpaw noticed Talonpaw slinking behind Charfur. Snowpaw sped over the flattened ground as fast as he could and stood hissing in the fellow apprentice's face. Talonpaw lifted a paw in surprise, but then growled as blood gushed from a slice down his flank. Snowpaw wished he had made the cut on Talonpaw's side.

"You're a coward Talonpaw!" Snowpaw snarled. His hackles were raised and his teeth were bared. Red tinged his vision as he stared evenly at the enemy apprentice.

Talonpaw spat in his face. "It's Talonclaw now!" He reared up and Snowpaw swiftly dashed under his legs as they came crashing down to the ground. He arched his back as he was under Talonclaw's belly to unbalance him. The brown tabby tom collapsed onto his side and Snowpaw leaned over him.

"You were about to attack my mentor from behind. You're a fox hearted warrior," he spat, his fur bristling.

"This is a battle! Anything goes. If you don't like it you should run home to your mother!" Talonclaw scoffed. His high and mighty attitude made Snowpaw's breath catch in his throat with rage.

Talonclaw lashed out and caught his muzzle. Pain ran through his body as he blinked away the blood welling on his nose. Snowpaw retaliated by leaping on his back and pressing him into the ground. Snowpaw bit down hard on Talonclaw's ear. The tom yowled and thrashed his way out. Snowpaw lost his grip and fell to the ground. The enemy warrior bit into his tail hard and a sharp pain laced up into his spine.

Snowpaw screeched in agony and tore his tail away. He stood and swiped at Talonclaw's ears and drove him into a bramble bush. The tom's pelt was getting twisted in the thorns and they pricked his skin. *I got you now!* Snowpaw thought victoriously.

"Get off!" he yelled finally. Snowpaw let him up and Talonclaw tore home through the undergrowth growling obscenities, but not before he gave him a glare as sharp as thorns.

"Run home you bottom feeder!" the young cat yelled after him.

Snowpaw looked around in victory. He was gasping for breath, but his chest was bursting with pride! The tide had changed and the SapphireClan warriors were losing rapidly now. They scrabbled through the undergrowth hissing and spitting as they ran for their home.

Watershine spun around as she crossed the border and narrowed her eyes. "This isn't over," she hissed menacingly. She turned and followed her clanmates home.

"And stay away! You fish breath cowards," Specklepelt yowled in triumph. Snowpaw had won his first battle. He stood, trying to catch his breath, and making sure to commit this momentous event to his memory forever.

"That should teach them a lesson," Oneclaw growled in his deep voice. His muzzle was dripping blood and his eyes were narrowed as he watched the SapphireClan warriors escape into their territory. The large brown warrior stalked up to the border line and marked it with his scent to make a point.

The rest of the patrol stood panting. Charfur had a torn ear and Flowertail was limping she came over to join the ground of ragged cats. Snowpaw had a couple scratches himself, and his tail still hurt where Talonclaw had bit down to the bone. Robintalon was supporting Littletail. He tried to look up ahead, but his eye was heavily swollen and he stumbled. They all began to slowly walk back to camp.

Snowpaw hurried to catch up to his littermate. Her fur was fluffed

and her eyes shone. There was blood on her pelt and clumps of fur between her claws, but she didn't seem hurt at all as she strode confidently back to camp.

"Are you okay?" he asked cautiously. Emberpaw squared her shoulders and turned to look him in the eye.

"That was so exhilarating! I loved it, I tore so many cats' pelts off and I even got Barkpaw's muzzle. But I guess he's Barkfur now. Anyway, it doesn't matter because he won't be the handsome cat he used to be. He squawked all the way home like a baby bird." She flexed her claws and Snowpaw felt an overwhelming sense of dread. But he pushed it away. *When did she become so ruthless?*

The group stumbled into camp and Moonbeam and Cloudpaw hurried around checking wounds. Littletail was rushed into the medicine cat's den because of his swollen eye. Snowpaw waited until last, he didn't feel too banged up. Cloudpaw had his tail bandaged with a poultice of goldenrod. She had said it'll help heal it, but she wanted to keep an eye on it for a few days anyway.

As Snowpaw padded out from under the roots he saw Charfur and Oneclaw talking with Sleetstar and Flameclaw, retelling their account of the battle. Rainwhisker, Meltwater, and Mistshade entered the camp with their jaws full of prey. Mistshade dropped her prey and raced over to her sister and asked what had happened. The other two followed more slowly.

As Mistshade raced past Snowpaw her soft scent wreathed around him. He heard her frantically asking Cloudpaw about the battle. She simply answered, "everyone's safe. We won."

Finally Snowpaw made it to the apprentices' den and snuck inside for some peace and quiet. He settled into his nest to nurse some of the scratches on his flank. But the quiet didn't last very long. Eaglepaw poked his head through the leafy branches and his eyes widened as he looked at Snowpaw's bandaged tail.

"I can't believe you got to fight!" Eaglepaw whined jealously. "We had to learn stupid hunting techniques again today." He walked into the den and sat down next to Snowpaw and sniffed at his tail. The

white and ginger apprentice quickly flicked his tail away from the younger prying cat.

"You are still too young, and hunting is very important," Snowpaw rebutted. "But I'm sure you'll experience a battle soon," he added as Eaglepaw looked down dejectedly. The young apprentice looked up at him.

"You think?" he asked quietly.

Snowpaw sighed and smiled a little. "I think so. I mean, you don't want battle to happen, but with the way SapphireClan is acting, I wouldn't be surprised if there was another soon."

Eaglepaw purred and headed out of the den. Snowpaw reluctantly stood to follow him. His stomach felt empty; he had to eat something. Snowpaw limped towards the fresh kill pile as the Eaglepaw and Leafpaw were practicing their battle moves in the clearing.

Snowpaw took a vole and munched on it. He wonderedwhere Emberpaw was; he couldn't see her around the clearing. The sun dappledthe sandy ground as it broke through the clouds. The new leaf leaves werebudding with life, and a warm breeze ruffled his white and ginger pelt. Howeverglad he was that leaf bare was over, he just couldn't shake a cold forebodingfeeling that nestled deep inside him.

Chapter 11

Snowpaw crouched low, his belly fur hardly brushing the leaf-strewn ground as he crept forward. He held his tail still. It was still sore from the battle from a couple of days ago, but Cloudpaw said it was starting to heal up nicely. Just up ahead, there was a huge squirrel nibbling on an acorn, seated on an old oak tree branch just above his head.

He tested the air. It was blowing towards him. *Perfect.*

He bunched his muscles under him once he was close enough. The squirrel didn't even notice him. Snowpaw leaped up and hooked his claws in the squirrel's bushy tail, dragging it to the forest floor. He killed it quickly and carried it back to where he had buried his earlier kills.

Snowpaw walked confidently forward with his squirrel in his jaws. Today he and Emberpaw were hunting for their final assessment. Charfur and Lizardbelly were out in the forest somewhere, watching them. But Snowpaw wasn't worried. He knew he was ready to be a warrior.

The ginger and white tom stepped through the underbrush gracefully. Tiny green shoots were pushing their way up through the leaf mould and small flowers were beginning to burst into life. As Snowpaw climbed to the top of the training hill, maw laden with his fresh kill, he heard a pleased voice behind him.

"That was brilliant!"

Snowpaw's ears twitched; he turned and warmly greeted his mentor. Placing his catch down he purred, "thank you Charfur! I've learned from the best."

"You've come a long way since I first started training you. You are more than ready to be a warrior."

Snowpaw purred as he admired his catch: a vole, a robin, and a squirrel. It was a bountiful haul on a warm, but overcast new leaf day. Charfur sat down beside him and began washing his whiskers. Snowpaw glanced around the forest and pricked his ears.

Chickadees were twittering above their heads high up in the trees and a light breeze rustled the bright green leaves. The grey clouds above were drifting lazily across the sky. *I wonder how Emberpaw is doing?* he thought as he gazed through the trees.

She soon climbed up the hill with her jaws crammed full. She had caught two shrews, a water vole, and a sparrow. Emberpaw's eyes were bright with confidence and pride. *There's no way we aren't passing our assessment today!*

"That catch is amazing!" Snowpaw commented as she padded nearer. Emberpaw placed it down on the ground and cleaned a burr out of her white fur.

"You are an impressive hunter," her mentor leaped down from a branch and onto the training hill. Dandelion fluff floated up into the air as she landed softly on the mound of earth.

"I know," Emberpaw said nonchalantly, her nose in the air. Lizardbelly flicked her tail in annoyance. They still hadn't been getting along recently. Emberpaw had outgrown her mentor. Snowpaw felt the same, but at least he had the decency to respect he and his mentor's relationship. Emberpaw constantly acted like she was better than everyone.

"In that case, you won't mind carrying your prey back to camp on your own would you?" Lizardbelly sounded irritated.

"Not at all." Emberpaw struggled to pick up her prey and keep it all in her jaws, but she refused help. Charfur, on the other hand, helped carry Snowpaw's prey back to camp without a word.

As they slid through the lush undergrowth Snowpaw noticed Lizardbelly's stomach bulged as she walked. *She's put on some weight since new leaf started,* he thought to himself, amused.

"Nice catch!" called Starnose as they emerged from the entrance tunnel and into the camp. Meltwater and Rainwhisker were nodding as the apprentices added their catch to the fresh kill pile.

"Leafpaw!" Flameclaw called to his apprentice. She came rushing out of the elders' den with moss-flecked fur. She looked flustered. "Bring some prey to the elders when you're done, I'm sure they'll appreciate it." She nodded and dashed back to finish cleaning their nests. Snowpaw purred; he didn't mind doing chores like that, but soon he wouldn't have to ever again!

Their mentors were chatting with Sleetstar and he was nodding slowly. Snowpaw was so excited that he had to try hard to keep his pelt from spiking with anticipation. He groomed it down flat, trying to look presentable. Emberpaw was licking her foreleg outside the apprentices' den, her white fur looked glossy in the darkening evening light.

"Let all cats join together beneath the Great Maple for a clan meeting!"

This is it! I'll finally be a warrior! Snowpaw's chest ached with excitement and his heart raced.

Snowpaw leaped up and sat in the middle of the clearing. Emberpaw joined him slowly as the rest of their clanmates gathered around. Moonbeam and Cloudpaw sat below their leader. Flameclaw joined them quickly. Oneclaw, Littletail, Badgerclaw, and Starnose licked their jaws as they finished their fresh kill.

Rainwhisker sat close to Meltwater, their pelts brushing. Stiffwhisker, Swiftear, and Whitemoss crept out from under the cedar tree. Whitemoss looked older than she had last new leaf, her pelt was dull and scruffy. Leafpaw and Eaglepaw came pelting out behind them and sat together excitedly murmuring between themselves.

Snaketail and Specklepelt sat near each other at the back of the group. Snowpaw couldn't help but notice how their kits were nothing like them. He wondered how such distrustful cats had made such little balls of energy and enthusiasm. Mistshade, Robintalon,

and Flowertail snuck in the camp, last to join.

Charfur and Lizardbelly came and sat close together beside their apprentices. Snowpaw looked up and saw Charfur's eyes glowing with pride. He felt pleased to have had such a great mentor. The young tom felt that he had learned so much and he knew he was ready to become a warrior that his clan could be proud of.

"You're going to be perfect," Charfur leaned in and said quietly to his apprentice. "You've turned into quite the confident young cat."

Snowpaw nodded his gratitude and squared his shoulders, ready for the next part of his life.

"I've got two apprentices here who are deserving of their warrior names," Sleetstar called into the warm evening air. Snowpaw's heart trilled in his chest, beating fast.

"Good luck," Charfur whispered to him.

"Snowpaw step forward." He stood nervously, but he puffed his chest out to appear confident. His ginger and white pelt shone like fire in the orange sunset light as the clouds cleared from the sky. "I, Sleetstar leader of EmeraldClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn. Snowpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Snowpaw shuddered. "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior name. Snowpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Snowblaze. Through this name you will honour your father. You have his courage and loyalty, and I can see you blazing a great path for this Clan like the sun."

Sleetstar placed his muzzle on the young warrior's head and Snowblaze licked his shoulder respectfully. As Snowblaze stood back a sweet scent wreathed around him and he felt warmth in his

heart. *Sunpelt and Yellowleaf, I will remember you always. Thank you for your blessing.*

Sleetstar stepped back as his Clan called out his new name.

"Snowblaze! Snowblaze!" He basked in the glory of becoming a warrior at last. He closed his eyes and let their pride and joy wash over and consume him. Charfur called the loudest. Snowblaze had become to see him as a father figure and he was overjoyed to know that Charfur had believed in him for so long.

"Emberpaw, step forward," Sleetstar commanded as their cries died down. She walked to their leader and stood calmly.

He spoke the ceremonial words and Emberpaw replied evenly, "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior name. Emberpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Emberbreeze. Through this name you will honour your mother. Her grace and strength of will have been passed down to you and I hope you will be as gentle as a leaf drifting on the breeze."

Snowblaze saw pain flash through her eyes at the mention of Yellowleaf, but she licked Sleetstar's shoulder and stood tall. Her eyes were hard, and the muscles under her pelt even harder. She had become a strong and durable warrior and Snowblaze was proud of her.

"Emberbreeze! Emberbreeze!" they called around them. Their voices swelled louder as every cat came to congratulate them. Charfur touched noses with Snowblaze and Starnose ran her tail along both their flanks.

"We'll be denmates again!" Flowertail said excitedly. Snowblaze nodded with shining eyes. He felt overwhelmed. He wanted to yowl up into the evening sky and shout his emotions, but he remembered his vigil that began tonight. He and Emberbreeze weren't allowed to talk until dawn tomorrow. And tonight they had to stay awake and guard the camp.

The cats around them split up and settled down to feast and share tongues. Snowblaze nuzzled his sister's pelt lovingly. She looked at him with satisfaction in her yellow eyes. They settled down together, pelts brushing. Snowblaze hadn't felt so close to her in a long time, but he was happy she was there with him.

Their clanmates slowly tucked themselves away intheir dens for the night. The moon was rising and the night was turning cold. Theirbreath turned to mist as they settled down to guard the camp entrance. Snowblazefluffed up his pelt to keep the chill out, and having his littermate beside himhelped to keep him warm and comfortable.

Chapter 12

Snowblaze stretched his legs all the way down to his claws making his muscles ache and pull. It felt satisfying as he stood after a long night of guarding the camp. Emberbreeze's white pelt was fluffed up to keep out the morning chill. The sun was barely over the horizon turning the grey covered sky a lighter shade.

Flameclaw stepped out of the warriors' den and nosed the fresh kill pile. He teased out a little mouse and crunched on it under the Great Maple. Badgerclaw, Snaketail, Mistshade, and Flowertail crept out after him. Flowertail let out a huge yawn and walked up to new warriors.

"How was your first night as a warrior?" she asked sleepily.

"Great!" Snowblaze's eyes shone.

"I'm glad you're warriors now, you both deserve it," she said kindly. Emberbreeze dipped her head and muttered a 'thanks'.

"I know," Snowblaze joked good-naturedly.

"I'm really excited to go on patrols and hunt with you." Her blue eyes sparkled lightly and Snowblaze's heart skipped a beat.

"Me too," he said excitedly. "I bet I'll be better at everything!"

Flowertail nudged him with her shoulder and said, "Yeah right! But I've got to go on the dawn patrol now, why don't you two get some sleep?" As she padded away towards the bramble entrance she called over her shoulder, "I got Mistshade to help me make nests for you both."

Snowblaze was glad to have her as a friend. She was kind to everyone. The two littermates snuck into the warriors' den and Emberbreeze sniffed out their empty nests. They picked their way around the rest of the sleeping warriors and Snaketail rolled over,

muttering in his sleep.

Their nests were near the outer edge of the den. One day when they were senior warriors they would sleep in the centre. Snowblaze circled in the moss and bracken nest and kneaded it until it was comfortable. He sunk down gratefully and it felt like sleeping in a cloud.

"I like the names we were given," Emberbreeze muttered sleepily beside him. Her tail was tucked over her nose. The ginger and white tom agreed. *Snowblaze. I'll blaze a path through this Clan like my father had.* His eyes fluttered closed and he drifted into sleep, thinking about Sunpelt.

When he awoke it was sunhigh and he and Emberbreeze were the only ones sleeping in the den. The bright new leaf sunlight filtered through the fresh leaves and dappled the ground. Blinking the sleep out of his eyes, Snowblaze was glad to see that the cloud cover was gone. It was warm now, and Snowblaze left the den to see what he could do.

Swiftear and Stiffwhisker were sunning themselves in the clearing and Whitemoss was gracefully chewing on a shrew nearby. Charfur and Lizardbelly were sharing tongues outside the warriors' den. Snowblaze could hardly believe how round her belly was! *She must be stuffing herself! No one else is that round.*

Flameclaw bounded over to him. "Can I get you to help Meltwater and Mistshade reinforce the nursery walls?"

"Of course," Snowblaze replied. He padded over to where the two she-cats were working together.

"When do you think Lizardbelly will move in?" Mistshade asked as she worked.

"She's got to soon, or she won't be able to catch a mouse if it landed between her paws!" Meltwater purred in amusement.

"What are you guys talking about?" Snowblaze padded up in the middle of their conversation.

"Haven't you noticed?" asked Mistshade incredulously. She paused with a bramble branch clasped between her paws.

"Noticed what?" Snowblaze was utterly confused.

"She's expecting kits!" Meltwater said joyously. "It's such a great thing to have new kits. She hasn't announced it to the Clan yet, but everyone knows. Charfur is over the moon."

Snowblaze looked at her in disbelief. But the black and white warrior *had* gotten big, and that would make sense. Her and Charfur had become really close lately, more so than before. He rarely left her side and was always bringing her prey and fresh moss and feathers to keep her nest soft.

"That's really great!" he meowed happily. Mistshade showed him where to help patch up the holes to make it strong and secure. Her paws lingered next to his and she turned quickly away, focusing on a different bramble stem. She worked quickly, weaving the branches with delicate paws. He couldn't help but notice how her well-groomed fur shone in the sun.

Snowblaze continued to help, even though he pricked his pads with thorns a few times. He wanted it to be the safest place in the camp if there were going to be new kits; especially if they were Charfur and Lizardbelly's kits.

As the day went on, cats came in and out of the camp. Emberbreeze had woken up and joined Badgerclaw, Littletail, and Rainwhisker on a hunting patrol. Cloudpaw padded across the clearing with herbs clamped in her jaws. She stopped in front of Stiffwhisker and dropped the bundle of herbs. They chatted and then the elder lapped up the greens, screwing up her face at the taste. But she looked up gratefully at the medicine cat apprentice.

The hunting patrol returned and dropped their addition to the fresh kill pile. Snowblaze hurried over to catch his sister. He wanted to preserve what little connection they had last night.

"Hey Emberbreeze!" he called as he padded up to her. She turned and looked at him. He was glad to see there was no distant look in

her eyes.

"Hi," she greeted politely.

"Have you heard Lizardbelly is expecting kits?" Snowblaze tried to make conversation.

"It's clear to see! She must be expecting them in about a moon."

"Was I the last one to know?" he muttered half to himself.

"Well you're pretty mouse-brained when it comes to she-cats at the best of times." Snowblaze spun as Meltwater walked past. *What does that mean?* He thought incredulously. But she had already walked away and met with Rainwhisker and he couldn't ask her what she had been implying.

"She's not wrong," replied Emberbreeze wryly. Snowblaze was taken aback. He opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted. "I've got to go now, I'll see you later." Emberbreeze quickly escaped through the entrance tunnel and Snowblaze was left staring after her.

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"It's time we're off," Sleetstar called to his group of warriors. Tonight was the full moon. It glistened above, its silver light shining brightly down into the camp. Silverpelt glittered around the forest. Snowblaze kneaded the ground impatiently as Sleetstar lead them out into the forest and broke into a run.

Snowblaze ran as quick as he could, flexing his muscles and unsheathing his claws to better grip the ground. Dirt flew from behind his paws as he quickly passed Oneclaw, Littletail, and Mistshade. Littletail let out a grunt of surprise as a clod of dirt smacked him in the face.

"Sorry!" he called over his shoulder, but he didn't stop. He surpassed Specklepelt and Snaketail, then Robintalon and Rainwhisker. Finally he came up behind Flameclaw and Sleetstar, not daring to overtake them, knowing it would be disrespectful.

He felt breath on his tail and he turned to see Emberbreeze trailing

closely behind him. She was running full pelt to keep up, her tail streaming out behind her. The group slowed as they crossed the border and neared the Ravine. Their leader guided them down the slope.

Snowblaze was suddenly unsure of where to go. This was his first gathering as a warrior, so he couldn't hang around with the other apprentices. But he also didn't know any other warriors. So he quickly followed after Rainwhisker and Robintalon, making sure to stay with cats from his own Clan.

Emberbreeze stalked away towards Birdfeather, Daisypetal, and Honeymoth. He wished he could follow, he knew Honeymoth would welcome him, but he didn't want to be the only tom in a group of young she-cats.

"Hey Snowblaze, this way." He realized that the two clanmates he had been following had seated themselves nearby with a little knot of warriors. He padded over nervously and sat beside Rainwhisker.

"This is Snowblaze!" he exclaimed to the group. "It's his first gathering as a warrior, so make him feel welcome." He looked pointedly at a light grey she-cat.

"As long as he doesn't say anything stupid I won't have to treat him like a stupid cat," she replied with her nose in the air.

"Morningfrost, that's not very nice!" chided a white and brown tom that sat beside her. "I'm Stormeyes and that's Morningfrost. Mind her tongue." He flashed his deep blue eyes at her and smirked.

"I'm Oakwhisker." The cat that had spoken dipped his head respectfully. His dark tabby pelt rippled in the moonlight and Snowblaze could see his strong muscles underneath. He tried in vain not to be intimidated.

"Nice to meet you." Snowblaze dipped his head in return, out of respect and to hide the overwhelmed look in his eyes.

"I know you," came a voice form behind him. His fur bristled; he knew he recognized it somehow, and not in a good way. Snowblaze

turned to see a dark brown she-cat sitting gracefully at the edge of the group. She had paused mid-lick and looked up at Snowblaze with emotionless blue eyes.

"Kestrelfur. At least we're meeting officially now in more peaceful times." He remembered her from the battle. She had fought viciously, but had ultimately been chased off. Snowblaze tried to hide his satisfaction. He didn't want to provoke her.

"I agree. You put up a good fight." She nodded and turned away towards the rocks that the leaders were perched on.

"A fight? When did you guys fight?" asked Morningfrost.

"Did you win?" Stormeyes followed up. He looked expectantly at Snowblaze as if he were waiting for a story. But Snowblaze could see Oakwhisker's pelt bristling out of the corner of his eye.

"Maybe we should let the leaders tell everyone," he said nervously, not wanting to start an argument with the SapphireClan warrior. Even though they had been the ones stealing prey.

"If you don't want to tell these two what happened, I will," started Robintalon. But as she stood Sleetstar called all the cats to join together and start the gathering. She grumbled, but Snowblaze was glad that the confrontation had been avoided. He knew Robintalon could be hot headed and stubborn.

Snowblaze settled down between the two littermates as the leaders waited for everyone to quiet down.

"I'm going to start this gathering with good news," Sleetstar began. "Tonight we have two brand new warriors with us! Snowblaze and Emberbreeze!"

Cheers rose up into the chilly night air, calling their names to the stars. Snowblaze sat up straight, unprepared for the quick introduction and for everyone's eyes to be burning his fur. He saw Emberbreeze sitting farther ahead. Her ears were pricked and she looked pleased.

"But now I have some bad news." The cheers died down and

questioning mews sounded from the RubyClan cats, unaware of the border skirmish that had occurred not too long ago.

"There are thieves among us!" he called menacingly towards the crowd of cats. Voices of anger rose up, but the EmeraldClan cats countered it with cries of anger, as SapphireClan tried to deny it.

"Who are you calling thieves?" Wingstar challenged the other leader, her white and brown pelt fluffed in disbelief.

"Not you Wingstar, not this time. SapphireClan has stolen prey from us! But only StarClan knows why. New leaf is upon us and prey is growing more plentiful every day. There is no need to take fresh kill, unless you are just greedy fish-eating cowards!" He snarled at Tawnystar.

Snowblaze felt the need to defend his leader's claim as Oakwhisker and Kestrelfur yowled out against his words nearby.

"Prove it!"

"That was an unjust battle!" screeched a cat behind the ginger and white tom. He flinched at their conviction.

"You stole prey and you know it!" Rainwhisker goaded Kestrelfur. She turned on him, her claws out and scruff spiked. Snowblaze stood to defend his clanmate.

"Enough!" Tawnystar screamed. Ever cat stopped at her commanding tone. "I do not have to explain myself to you, Sleetstar." She turned to look up at him, her eyes flashing in anger. "Not after finding your Clan's scent on our side of the border!"

Her accusation sent Snowblaze reeling, and it was all he could do not to yell out a furious response. Sleetstar was standing rigid on the rock, his eyes narrowed. He could see his effort not to raise the fur along his spine. Robintalon and Snaketail rose to their paws. He hoped they would hold their tongues.

"None of my warriors would have crossed your border and I know it. We don't hold the warrior code in such disregard. We respect it. Unlike some cats."

Tawnystar growled and crouched, ready to attack, when suddenly the rock-strewn clearing grew dark. Snowblaze crouched in fear and looked up to see a thick cloud beginning to cover the moon.

"StarClan is angry!" yowled a she-cat with fear coating her voice.

"This gathering is over!" Torrentstep, the RubyClan medicine cat called commandingly.

Snowblaze hurried over to the rest of his clanmates as they scurried up out of the Ravine and back into their territory.

The group was buzzing with curiosity. Moonbeam and Flameclaw were crowding Sleetstar asking him questions as Cloudpaw trotted along behind them, strangely focused on the conversation. Robintalon and Rainwhisker were gossiping about who they think could have crossed the border. But Snowblaze wasn't even sure anyone crossed it in the first place.

"Who do you think it was?" Robintalon wondered.

"Not me, that's for sure. I hate those fish-hearts." Specklepelt muttered as she passed the younger warriors. Snaketail followed, giving the group a hard stare.

"What got under his skin?" Rainwhisker whispered. His eyes followed Snaketail as he slunk away.

"They're both always so prickly," Snowblaze added to the conversation. "When I saved their kits, neither of them were even grateful."

"Really?" Rainwhisker asked disbelievingly. His bright blue eyes were wide with scepticism.

"It's true." Emberbreeze caught up to them and backed up Snowblaze's statement. "Snaketail is just a snake, like his name implies. There are a lot of snakes in this Clan."

Snowblaze worried at the look in her eyes and hoped the other two didn't see it. But Robintalon glared at the younger warrior and Rainwhisker looked taken aback.

"What do you mean?" Snowblaze tried to clear the air, but his sister had already walked ahead.

Robintalon and Rainwhisker padded on together,talking with heads bent. They left Snowblaze behind at the back of the group.Even the elders were hurrying forward, wanting to be back in the safety oftheir den. Tawnystar's accusation had shaken the Clan to the core. Who couldthey trust? Was she lying or was there truth to her statement?

Chapter 13

Lizardbelly tottered out from under the brambles that protected the nursery. She had gotten huge and round in the last moon. Moonbeam recently said that her kits were due any day now. Charfur hurried forward to support his mate as she walked determinedly to the fresh kill pile.

Snowblaze snickered at the way her legs stuck out awkwardly from her body. But it was truly a great thing that the Clan was being blessed with more kits. Cloudwhisker watched her, unusually focused. She had gotten her full medicine cat name last half-moon after that disastrous gathering.

The next morning as the sun has risen over the horizon, Sleetstar had called everyone together to welcome the new medicine cat. Cloudwhisker had stars in her eyes and she had seemed confident as she stood with her head held high. Compared to the small and distracted apprentice she had been, Cloudwhisker seemed like a whole new cat. She had knowledge in her eyes and wariness too, as her gaze travelled over her clanmates. It had lingered on Emberbreeze for a heartbeat, but Snowblaze twitched his ears and had ignored it.

Snowblaze wondered what it was like in the Star Cave. It was probably dark and damp, but he couldn't help but imagine what was down there and what it was like to share tongues with StarClan. His heart beat with the ache of knowing he would probably never go down there, unless he became leader of course. But for now he was just an ordinary warrior.

Flameclaw shook him out of his thoughts as he padded up to the young warrior. "You're going to join Specklepelt's sunhigh patrol. We're still keeping an eye on the SapphireClan border. Even though nothing has happened since the gathering, I'd rather be safe than sorry." Snowblaze agreed and the deputy padded away to the two apprentices.

It was just after dawn. The sun was rising slowly and the clouds were clearing away. A slight breeze ruffled the trees. Snowblaze had plenty of time to hunt before he had to go on patrol. He stretched quickly and then meandered out into the forest.

"Where are you going?" sounded a friendly voice behind him. Flowertail caught up and walked closely beside him. A little thrill went through Snowblaze when he saw her friendly eyes.

"I'm going hunting for a bit. I'm going on the sunhigh patrol, so I had hoped to catch something before then."

"Wonderful! Mind if I come with you?"

"Sure," he replied happily. He enjoyed having the bubbly warrior around him. She was always a positive influence on his day. Her cream coloured pelt brushed his briefly as she sped past him, weaving through the undergrowth. Snowblaze followed quickly, not wanting to be left behind.

As he rounded a thick patch of wild grass, he realized that he had lost sight of his friend. He looked around quickly, but she was nowhere to be found. The only sound was the wind rustling the stalks of grass together and her scent trail ended abruptly.

Snowblaze shrugged his shoulders. He was originally going to go hunting alone anyway, but he wondered if she was okay and where she had gotten to. Suddenly a 'thump' sounded beside him and he leaped away staring at the dead body of a squirrel.

His forepaw was raised questioningly. He prodded the squirrel; it was dead alright. He looked up as leaves rustled above his head. His ears folded back and he let out a hiss. Whatever was up there sounded bigger than a squirrel.

A sudden bundle of leaves fell and obscured his vision as something leaped down beside him! Snowblaze shook the foliage out of his face and stared into blue eyes that shined back with amusement.

"Flowertail! You scared me out of my fur!"

"I know!" she giggled outrageously. Snowblaze shoved her lightly to

hide his embarrassment. Flowertail flicked her tail and picked up her catch. "I'd better bring this back," she mumbled and fled back towards the camp.

Snowblaze rolled his eyes. "She's insane," he muttered to himself. He continued his hunt and prowled into the trees.

As the sun rose higher into the sky, Snowblaze pushed his way through the entrance tunnel with a fat pigeon clamped in his jaws. He gently dropped it on the fresh kill pile and waited patiently for Specklepelt.

"Did you catch that?" Mistshade padded over towards the tom. She looked at him shyly with her deep blue eyes. Which was odd, he thought, because she was usually so self-assured and confident.

"Impressive isn't it?" Snowblaze pawed the pigeon and pushed it over to his clanmate. "Want to share it?"

Mistshade glanced up at him and then quickly away as she mumbled, "sure, I'd love to."

Snowblaze looked at her in puzzlement as he followed her to a shaded spot in the clearing. It wasn't like her to be quiet and unsure. Her light grey fur glinted gently in the sunlight as she slipped under some overhanging ferns. Snowblaze settled own beside Mistshade and offered her the first bite.

"Thanks Snowblaze." She pulled out some feathers and took a delicate bite. He couldn't help but laugh as she looked up with a feather stuck to her nose.

"What are you laughing at?" she asked defensively.

"There's a feather on your nose!"

She looked down, cross-eyed to see down her muzzle, which made him laugh even harder. Mistshade huffed and the feather unstuck. It floated up into the air and then gently down onto Snowblaze's head.

"Ha! Serves you right for laughing at me." She smiled at him deviously.

"You sound like your old self again," he sounded relieved as he pawed the feather off his head.

Mistshade took another bite and sniffed at him, her nose in the air. Snowblaze smiled at her and bit into the juicy pigeon. He liked her, she was smart and confident and a brilliant cat all around. They chatted about their day as they finished their meal together. It was a nice meal, Snowblaze thought. She was an easy cat to be around. But soon Specklepelt called for him to join the patrol.

Snowblaze stood and ran his tail gently along his denmate's spine. "I'll see you around okay?"

"Okay," she responded softly.

Snowblaze followed the patrol into the forest, a bounce in his step that he had never noticed before. He felt light on his feet and unexpectedly happy.

***

When Snowblaze returned from patrol he found Mistshade talking with Meltwater and Robintalon as they lay together under a cluster of daisies. Snowblaze walked over awkwardly. He wanted to talk to Mistshade some more. He had enjoyed their meal together earlier.

"So I told him to buzz off. I could prove I was a better hunter than him any day!" Robintalon exclaimed as he walked up.

"I don't know, I think Rainwhisker is a brilliant hunter," Meltwater rebutted. Robintalon rolled her eyes at her friend.

"It's only because you're in love with the dumb tom that you would think that."

"Hey! He's not dumb!" Meltwater's tail twitched in annoyance. They continued to bicker amongst themselves and Snowblaze crept up beside Mistshade, who was watching them in amusement.

"D-do you want to go for a walk with me?" he asked her clumsily. She looked up at him and he saw delight in her eyes.

"Sure!" She stood and brushed her pelt against his. "These two will be at it for ages."

Snowblaze laughed nervously and followed the she-cat out through the camp entrance and out into the forest. The noise from the gully quieted down as they walked farther away.

Meltwater walked down a path that led to the mountain stream. Her soft grey fur brushed against the undergrowth in a satisfying way and Snowblaze was staring at her tail tip as it wove enticingly through the leaves.

He could hear the stream chattering on the stones up ahead and Mistshade slowed down. He caught up to her glanced at her.

"So what did you want to talk about?" she asked him.

"I-I don't know. I just wanted to spend some time with you," he stumbled over his words. He didn't know what to say, he hadn't thought about that before he asked her to join him in the forest.

She rolled her eyes and butted her head against his chin. She crouched and lapped at the cold water, her eyes flashed up to him seductively. Snowblaze's heart beat fast in his chest and his ears turned hot.

He felt flustered and at a loss for what to say or do. So he just dropped quickly to the ground and drank from the stream beside her. He focussed on the water as it ran smoothly over the multi-coloured stones.

"You know you can talk to me about anything," she said quietly. He looked over at her and pleasure ran through his body.

"I like spending time with you," he confessed. "I feel happy when I'm around you."

"I like spending time with you too. Even though you're funny and awkward. I like it, it makes you special."

Awkward? I've never been awkward. Only recently, and only around you, he thought to himself. She began to purr as she moved closer

to him. They were sitting now, looking out over the stream and into the forest.

Mistshade tentatively placed her tail on his. Snowblaze looked over at her in surprise and he thought she looked embarrassed. He had never seen he look that way before, but something inside him loved it. He liked when she was flustered. It made him feel better about feeling that way too.

But suddenly his face was splashed with freezing water and he recoiled violently.

"Hey!" He pawed the water off his face and licked it clean.

"You looked a little hot," the grey she-cat mused. "I thought you needed some cooling off."

"I did not!" he responded playfully and dipped his paw secretively in the water. He flicked it up and caught Mistshade with spinning droplets of water.

"You furball!" she chided playfully as she flicked the water off her ears.

"I thought you looked hot," he responded, mocking her. "You needed some cooling off." He smiled at her and she good-naturedly knocked him over in response.

"Don't mock me! You don't want to see me when I'm angry." She growled and crouched to the ground as if to play fight.

"Oh yeah? You don't scare me!" Snowblaze retorted. "You're nothing more than a-"

He was cut off as the breath was knocked out of him. Mistshade had leaped at him and pinned him to the ground.

"What were you saying?"

"I said you don't scare me."

"I should scare you," she said softly, her face close to his, her breath

lingering near his muzzle. Mistshade leaned in and touched her nose to his. Instantly Snowblaze's heart pounded in his chest like it never had before. Her sparkling eyes looked down on him and he was lost in their blue depths.

Maybe I am a little scared, he thought distractedly. *Scared of the way she makes me feel...*

But his friend quickly bounced off of him and stood beside him, ears pricked. Snowblaze still lay on his back.

"What is it?" he asked her.

"I heard something weird."

Snowblaze propped himself up on his side and listened. The leaves rustled in the breeze and trees creaked and groaned. The stream was babbling beside him and it was hard for him to hear anything else.

"It sounded big," she whispered, her scruff sticking up. "Bigger than a fox." An eerie feeling pressed down on the two young cats.

Suddenly Snowblaze heard something. It sounded like rattling branches. And footsteps.

He stood quickly and shoved Mistshade into nearby patch of golden rod. They huddled there together, hidden, as they waited for the giant to make an appearance. Snowblaze could see movement in the distance. It was getting closer and he shivered in fear.

"Are you afraid?" Mistshade asked, trying to sound confident. But there was a shake in her voice and Snowblaze felt an overwhelming need to protect her. He didn't answer in fear of the giant hearing them.

The footsteps grew louder. But they weren't angry or fast moving. They were deliberate and delicate. Then suddenly a large light brown animal stepped out into the open.

It had a short tail, long legs, and huge horns on its head! Snowblaze stared at the horns and wondered what it would be like to have

those rip through your body. He tried not to cower in fear.

The animal stepped into the stream and bent its long neck to take a drink. Its ears were twitching with every sound and the two cats held their breath.

"I think it's a deer," Mistshade whispered in the tom's ear. Snowblaze remembered the day he was first taken into the forest with his mentor. Charfur had told him about deer. They were big, but they weren't dangerous unless they were spooked.

He noticed Mistshade stood beside him. She was staring up at the deer in wonder, her mouth slightly open. She began to creep out slowly toward the large animal. Snowblaze's fur stood up on end, but he didn't want to move too quickly.

"Mistshade! What are you doing?" he whispered as forcefully as he dared.

"I want to see it up close. It's beautiful."

"Be careful," he panicked. But she was moving slowly, placing each paw on the ground carefully, so as not to disturb the deer.

Her delicate paw steps brought her closer and closer. The deer was still lapping at the stream water and now she was within a tail length. It suddenly noticed that she was there and lifted its head to look her in the eyes.

Snowblaze held his breath; ready to bolt to her side if it attacked.

Mistshade put a tentative paw to the ground and took one step closer. The deer stretched its head forward and sniffed at Mistshade. She lifted her head and touched her little pink nose to its big black one.

The deer swivelled its ears forward and lifted its head suddenly, looking into the forest behind them. It bounded away, taking giant leaps that cleared bushes Snowblaze couldn't even dream to jump over.

And as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone.

He let out his breath and looked at Mistshade. She stared after the deer and he padded up to stand beside her.

"That was amazing!" she breathed. Her eyes werealight with wonder and Snowblaze couldn't help but stare at her with the samewonder in his own eyes. She was amazing and bold and he wanted to be next to herforever.

Chapter 14

A mist rose between the tree trunks and shrouded the ferns below. Snowblaze had left the camp early; he couldn't sleep. Lately Emberbreeze had been even more restless, turning fitfully in her sleep and leaving the den for long periods of time in the middle of the night.

Snowblaze had begged her to talk to him, but she wouldn't. She only ever said 'I'm fine, you don't have to worry about me.' But Snowblaze did worry about his littermate. Something was bothering her, and they used to be so close. Now she hardly conversed with anyone.

She had left the den again last night. Snowblaze had woken briefly then fell back into an uneasy sleep. Finally, unable to dream, he snuck out of the camp and tried to follow his sister. The scent trail didn't last long; the mist had obscured it until there was nothing left. But, he thought uneasily, the trail seemed to lead directly towards SapphireClan territory.

Now the ginger and white tom sat in a tree, balancing easily on the thick branch. He hoped to spot his sister coming back into camp. The sun was rising slowly, turning the sky a light pink as it gradually burned the mist away. Despite the air being wet with dew, he knew the sun would soon scorch the earth with its heat. It hadn't rained in over a moon.

Birds were beginning to twitter when he finally spotted her white fur slinking through the undergrowth. He leaped gracefully down from the tree and landed behind her. Startled, she whipped around with teeth bared and claws out. Snowblaze's eyes widened in dismay at her hostility.

"It's only me!"

"Are you following me?" she snarled.

"No," he replied confidently. He would find out what was wrong if he had to drag it out of her. "You left your nest again last night. Tell me where you go," he pleaded.

"I already told you not to worry about it."

"But you're my sister and I'm just trying to look out for you."

"And you're my nosy brother who thinks the world revolves around him."

Snowblaze recoiled in pain at the insult. Emberbreeze's eyes flashed briefly, but quickly hardened again, void of emotion.

"Just mind your own business." She stalked away from him back to camp. He followed her slowly.

Cats were stirring now. Badgerclaw, Oneclaw, Starnose, and Eaglepaw left on the dawn patrol padding sleepily through the entrance tunnel. Meltwater and Rainwhisker walked into the forest side-by-side, tails entwined. Even though they were young, Snowblaze briefly wondered when Meltwater would be expecting his kits. They were together every second of the day.

Charfur and Lizardbelly were sharing tongues outside the nursery as their two kits, Sparklekit and Shrewkit, chased a butterfly around the clearing. They had come into the world about a half moon ago. It had been a joyous night when the kits had been born. Snowblaze remembered it clearly.

The sun had set and the indigo sky was speckled with stars. He was about to head into the warriors' den to sleep when he heard Lizardbelly in pain. Charfur had shot out of the nursery with his fur sticking up in clumps.

"Moonbeam!" he called for the medicine cat as he raced over to the Great Maple, where his den was. They both hurried back to the nursery and Starnose, woken by the commotion, followed them in. Quickly Charfur was shooed out of the den and he paced the clearing restlessly.

Snowblaze kept up with his old mentor and muttered words of

encouragement and comfort. It wasn't long until Moonbeam exited the nursery. Charfur raced up to him.

"Is everything okay? How's Lizardbelly?"

"Everything went smoothly, Charfur. You're a father to a beautiful she-kit and a beautiful tom. Go in and see your family."

Charfur's shoulders had sunk in relief. Snowblaze followed slowly, but the medicine cat held him back.

"Let them be together tonight. Tomorrow you can see them."

Snowblaze agreed and went back towards his nest to sleep. His eyes drooped with tiredness, despite the excitement that had just occurred. He entered the den, wanting to wake Emberbreeze and tell her the good news, only to find her nest empty yet again. He rolled his eyes and settled into his own nest.

Little Sparklekit's eyes were fully opened now, and she was already exploring the world. She was a little ball of energy. Her brother was smaller and he seemed to be falling behind in his growth. Lizardbelly never let him wander too far away, and it never seemed like he wanted to stray too far anyway.

Sparklekit's black and white specked pelt was fluffed up in excitement as she neared her prey. But the butterfly quickly swooped up away from her tiny paws. Shrewkit trailed happily behind her. It was so peaceful Snowblaze had almost forgot about the quarrel he and his sister had that morning. But it still nagged at the back of his mind.

Flameclaw walked up to him. "They're so cute aren't they?" Snowblaze nodded his head in agreement. "It's a blessing to have more kits in the clan."

"They'll grow up to be wonderful warriors," Snowblaze added. "With those two as their parents how could they not?"

Flameclaw purred his agreement. "I was hoping you would join my hunting patrol this morning. I'm taking Leafpaw out with Rainwhisker and Flowertail."

"I would love to!" Snowblaze responded.

The sun was fully over the horizon now and light fluffy clouds drifted lazily across the sky. It was going to be a beautiful day, and the clouds that hung over Snowblaze's heart this morning had been lifted slightly.

They padded through the forest as silently as they could. It was hard sometimes because the leaves and plants were so dry that they crinkled under their paw steps. Snowblaze hoped for rain.

The group halted next to a prickly holly bush. Ahead was a small starling pecking at the ground.

"Leafpaw, remember what I taught you?" Flameclaw asked her. She nodded determinedly. "See if you can catch that starling," he whispered.

She crouched and tested the wind. Leafpaw shuffled to her right a little and began to creep forward silently. Snowblaze admired her skill despite her still being a young apprentice. She leaped with her little legs, but the muscles managed to carry her to the bird. She landed on it squarely and quickly snapped its neck. Flameclaw stood and waited proudly for her to trot back to him.

"You did very well!" he praised her. Flowertail was purring in agreement and the young cat glowed happily. They buried her prey and continued on.

Snowblaze padded beside Rainwhisker. He was silent; his ears were pricked to listen to the forest sounds around him. The brown and white warrior looked over sideways at Snowblaze.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I, uh, was wondering if you wanted to practice battle moves with me later?" Snowblaze waited hopefully for Rainwhisker's response. He wanted to be better friends with the tom.

"You know you're not an apprentice anymore, right?" Rainwhisker twitched his whiskers playfully.

"And I'm glad I'm not!" Snowblaze answered quickly. "But I still think it's a good idea to keep our moves sharp and well practiced. Especially with SapphireClan acting as shady as they are."

Rainwhisker paused as if to think about it and then nodded. "It can't hurt I suppose."

After the group had finished their hunt and deposited their prey on the fresh kill pile, Snowblaze and Rainwhisker had left the camp and headed toward the training hill. Once they were there Snowblaze turned and sunk into a crouch.

"Attack me," he growled.

Rainwhisker narrowed his eyes and crouched to spring. Snowblaze anticipated his move and darted forward as Rainwhisker landed where he had just been. Triumphant, Snowblaze turned to deal a few blows, but he wasn't quick enough. Rainwhisker had landed gracefully and spun on his heels, smashing his forepaws into Snowblaze's flank as he was turning to face his clanmate. Snowblaze huffed as he was shoved backward and the air was forced out of his lungs. He barely caught himself before he lost his balance.

"Nice one!" he panted.

"If I were a RubyClan warrior, you'd be mouse meat!" the older tom jabbed back.

"Oh yeah?" Snowblaze challenged.

They simultaneously stood on their back paws and battered each other with their forepaws. Snowblaze snuck a few padded blows in, but Rainwhisker managed to daze the younger warrior with a smack to the side of his head. Snowblaze stumbled back, but stayed upright. He shook out his head and, just in time, ducked under Rainwhisker as he flew overhead.

This time Snowblaze arched his back and caught the brown and white warrior in the belly, throwing him off to the side. He landed on his side, some distance away and scrambled to his feet. They

both stood facing each other and breathing heavily.

"You're good," Rainwhisker nodded approvingly to his friend.

"You're not too bad yourself," Snowblaze responded with a purr. "I mean, you have been a warrior longer than me, so I suppose you should be a little better," he teased, shoving Rainwhisker's shoulder playfully. Rainwhisker shoved him back even harder and raced away into a nearby white pine.

Snowblaze's paws slipped on the leaves comically as he tried to follow him quickly up the tree. Soon they were both leaping from branch to branch, Rainwhisker laughing as he stayed just out of reach.

"Betcha can't catch me!" he yowled over his shoulder as he jumped into the next tree. But Snowblaze was determined.

"We'll see about that!" he yowled back.

The branch under Snowblaze's paws wobbled dangerously as he neared the thinner end. He dared not look down as he bunched up his haunches and leaped into the next tree, following his clanmate. They bounded down a few branches onto some more solid limbs.

Snowblaze thought back to when he was a kit and the times he got in trouble for climbing too high. Now he felt exhilarated as the wind blew through his fur and as leaves bounced and fluttered under his weight. He imagined his mother would still find a way to chastise him, even as a warrior. But he knew that she had only done it out of love.

"Slow slug!" Rainwhisker teased. Snowblaze looked up and saw him perched like an owl.

"I'll show you slow slug!" he growled back good-humouredly. The white and ginger warrior raced along the branched and with all his might he leaped up! His claws sank into a branch above his Rainwhisker and his muscles strained as he pulled himself up onto the tree limb.

The older tom looked up at him, eyes wide, but he quickly compsed

himself. "Nice leap! But you still haven't caught me."

The brown warriors tail flicked behind him as he swarmed down the tree. Snowblaze rolled his eyes and followed; he would not be defeated.

As Rainwhisker reached the lowest branch, Snowblaze jumped down. His heart lurched in his chest; he may have misjudged the distance. He flew between branches and leaves whipped his face. One had sliced his cheek, but he had no time to worry about it as he collided with the other warrior. The tom let out a mew of surprise as they dropped out of the tree.

They landed in a pile of soft leaves. At least the fall hadn't been too far, but unfortunately Snowblaze helped break Rainwhisker's fall. He groaned as the older warrior crawled off him.

"Caught you," he muttered weakly.

Rainwhisker couldn't help but snicker. His body shook with laughter as Snowblaze stumbled to his feet. He was sore, but he was okay.

"Alright, alright, you caught me," the brown tom admitted. "Are you okay? I mean, I landed on you, so I'm fine, but what about you?"

Snowblaze looked himself over, but didn't see any cuts. He would probably have a couple bruises though.

"I'm alright. I think I'm going to sleep well tonight! Maybe I can ask Moonbeam for a couple poppy seeds though."

"How are you going to ask him without admitting you fell out of a tree?" Rainwhisker asked as they began to pad back to camp.

"I don't know... I guess I don't want him to know that." Snowblaze limped home beside his friend. The more they walked, the better he felt. By the time they got back to camp, Snowblaze wasn't all that sore.

Meltwater padded up to Rainwhisker as they entered camp. She looked agitated and Snowblaze nodded to the tom as he walked

away to avoid the situation.

"Where have you been? And why is your fur all rumpled?" she asked him in a tense voice. Snowblaze didn't hear his response, but he saw her calm down as Rainwhisker licked her between her ears. They fought sometimes, but Snowblaze envied the connection they had with each other.

As Snowblaze settled down to groom his fur he saw Emberbreeze slink back into camp. Her fur was dusty and it stuck out in all directions. She disappeared behind the warriors' den. Snowblaze's ears pricked, but he didn't want to bother her, despite his burning curiosity. He didn't want to fight with her again.

As he smoothed his fur he glanced up to see Flowertail padding after her old mentor as he headed for the entrance tunnel. Snowblaze felt a little disconcerted at the longing look in her eyes as she followed hard on his heels. He didn't understand the feeling simmering in his stomach.

I'm just looking out for my friend. He tried to convince himself. *There's a big age difference between the two, I just want to make sure she'll be okay. She's too sweet to have her heart broken.*

He was lost in thought, mid lick, when a soft voice sounded beside him.

"Hello Snowblaze." He looked up to see Mistshade standing close to him. "May I?" she gestured with her tail to lie next to him. He nodded and she crouched next to him and began to groom his fur.

"Where did you get the cut on your cheek?" she asked, concern in her soft voice.

"Uh... Rainwhisker and I were practicing our battle moves," he mewed, not entirely wanting to tell her the whole story.

"You were using claws?" Her eyes were alight with worry and she stared at him, waiting for an answer.

"No," he sighed reluctantly. "I actually fell out of a tree."

He turned to look at the she-cat as she purred in amusement. His embarrassment faded when she opened her eyes with a soft look. "Sounds just like you Snowblaze."

Snowblaze closed his eyes in contentment as her long strong tongue strokes continued and it soothed his worried mind.

"Seems like Badgerclaw has found himself an admirer," she said after a while. Snowblaze was jerked back to the present.

"I guess," he grunted. Mistshade paused.

"Aren't you happy for them?"

"I dunno. I suppose, but I don't want her to get hurt," he confessed.

The grey she-cat stiffened beside him and he saw pain lace through her eyes. He wondered what he had said. Snowblaze opened his mouth to ask, but was immediately cut off.

"I mean, if you care about her, I guess you *would* feel that way." Mistshade stood and stalked away towards Robintalon. Snowblaze was left staring after her with his mouth gaped open.

I guess I am really clueless when it comes to she-cats. He shook his head in bewilderment.

At that moment Emberbreeze snuck back around the warriors' den with groomed fur and slipped under the hawthorn branches. Snowblaze stood and quickly followed her in. She was curled up in the gloom, but he could see her yellow eyes glinting faintly.

"Are you okay?" he asked hesitantly.

"Fine." She turned and tucked her nose under her tail.

Snowblaze huffed in exasperation. She would never say anything more than a couple words to him or anyone. "Will you ever talk to me again?"

Emberbreeze's eyes looked up quickly and then darted away again. She sighed quietly. Snowblaze crouched down in front of her half in

someone's nest and tucked his front paws under himself.

"I'm sorry Snowblaze," she began softly. "I just don't want you to get mixed up with all of this."

"What is 'all of this'? You can confide in me, I'll always have your back."

"I can't, brother, I just can't. You wouldn't understand. No one understands." She was looking into his eyes now, a pleading look pooling in the bright yellow depths. He wanted to help her so much, but she just wouldn't let him.

"Emberbreeze, please," he begged. "You're always restless and you sneak around. You don't sleep much anymore and you won't tell me where you're going. I don't want to follow you because I want to trust you, but you make me worry all the time."

"Trust," Emberbreeze snorted. Her eyes had hardened again as she studied her paws. Her claws were sliding in and out, tearing at the moss lining her nest. "There isn't much of that anymore." Snowblaze's ears pricked in surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"We trusted Sleetstar when he chose our parents for that patrol. We trusted our mentors to watch over them. But what a lot of good that did."

Snowblaze's heart eased, and a tension in his shoulders loosened. *So that's what this has been about. She's still upset about our parents dying.*

"There wasn't anything anyone could do Emberbreeze. I know it hurts. It still does for me too. But I've learned that we have to keep moving forward or else we'll get stuck in the past."

"But it hurts so *much*. I can't get past it. Every day I test myself. I test the limits. I need to find something to distract me, to hide the pain, because that's all I feel."

The ginger and white tom leaned forward ever so slightly towards his littermate. Hope flared in his chest and his heart beat faster.

This was the most she had ever said to him! He couldn't let this moment end. He knew he had to be careful about everything he said from this point on.

"I think you need to find something healthy that can distract you," he began carefully. "But you don't want to erase the pain completely right? It's a horrible feeling, but it's a feeling all the same. It just means you had- no, *have*- a lot of love for our parents." His sister's white ears pricked a tiny fraction and he continued.

"Having any emotions, even if they're not good ones, means you're a cat. We all feel horrible sometimes; it's normal. But like I said, we have to keep moving towards the future, for us and for our clanmates." He couldn't keep the hope and joy from his voice as he hurried on. "We can get through this together, I can help you."

"There's no help for me, all I am is bitterness. All I feel is pain."

Her tail flicked in defeat and Snowblaze's heart dropped. She tucked her muzzle under her tail once more and closed her eyes.

"I know you're trying to help, but no one can help me," she mumbled around her white tail fur.

"Emberbreeze," he whispered his sister's name in heartbreak. When she didn't open her eyes Snowblaze backed sadly out of the den. *What can I do? I tried.*

He sighed and walked over to the nursery where Lizardbelly and Charfur were cuddled together. If anyone knew anything, it would be Charfur. The older warrior looked up as his old apprentice approached.

"I need advice," he admitted quietly. Lizardbelly rose in understanding and gathered her kits towards her.

"Come little ones, it's time for you nap." The tiny kits yawned and followed their mother on unsteady paws.

"Sit," Charfur invited him forward. "What's on your mind?"

Silence followed as Snowblaze tried to figure out what to say. He

was extremely worried about Emberbreeze, but he didn't want to unnecessarily burden other cats too, and he didn't want too many knowing what was going on, just in case it was something bad.

"It's Emberbreeze," he pushed out finally, knowing he could trust the older warrior. Charfur's ears pricked, but he remained silent.

"Every other night she disappears form the den and I don't know where she's going. But she won't explain it to me and maybe it's nothing, but I want to help her. She just won't let me. And she won't talk to anyone. Our parent's death must have hurt her way more than I imagined and I'm afraid that I wasn't there for her when she needed me."

Snowblaze desperately gulped air into his lungs. He had spewed everything in one breath. As he sat breathing heavily, the grey warrior sat silently, his eyes focussed on the ground.

"I think you've done all you can, Snowblaze. There's no need to blame yourself for any of her choices." He looked up in surprise as Charfur continued. "She's a grown cat and can make all her own decisions. It's not up to us to determine what she does."

"But what if she's making the wrong choices?" Concern seeped from Snowblaze's voice.

"The only thing we can do is be here for her when she decides to confide in us. Whenever that may be and whatever it may be about."

His calm words made sense in Snowblaze's frantic mind. He was comforted a little, but he couldn't shake the anxious feeling. He felt cold deep inside, like something was really wrong with her. He knew she had told him some things today about what she was feeling, but it didn't lead to any solution in his mind.

"Thank you Charfur. I know you're right," he sighed. Charfur nodded and Snowblaze stood to leave.

"One more piece of advice before you go." Snowblaze turned back curiously.

"What is it?"

"Sometimes what you want, isn't what you need. Sometimes what you need is right in front of you. Don't forget to look or you might miss out on something good."

Snowblaze looked back in bewilderment. Charfur had a knowing glint in his eye, but he stood and walked towards the fresh kill pile before he could ask what he meant. *He's being as vague as StarClan,* he grumbled in his head.

His eye caught Mistshade's as she lay besideMeltwater. They were talking together and Mistshade's tail-tip was flicking inannoyance as she glared at him. Too much had happened today and he couldn'tdeal with whatever they were glaring at him about. He abruptly turned andstalked out into the forest. The fresh smell of growing things cleared his headand he walked alone beneath the canopy.

Chapter 15

The sun rose slowly into the sky, turning it a light orange. Snowblaze lay in his nest staring up through the hawthorn branches and into the forest above. He hadn't slept that night. Emberbreeze had left again and it seemed like he woke every time she did. Lately he had been getting less and less sleep, and he had become more and more irritable.

He had snapped at Leafpaw when she had gotten in his way causing him to trip and land ungracefully, twisting a paw. He had felt bad about it and she had been wary around him for a while afterward. But he couldn't help his anger and frustration at his sister.

Even Flowertail was keeping her distance. But maybe it was all in his head. She had been spending all her time with Badgerclaw, following him around on hunting and border patrols. It seemed like she never left his side. Snowblaze couldn't help but notice that he never outwardly showed her much love in return. But he couldn't summon the courage to confront her about it. They could do whatever they wanted.

And Mistshade had avoided him since the last time she snipped at him. The day his littermate had told him about how she was feeling. He didn't understand why the grey she-cat left him alone, but he had begun to miss the feeling of her being around. And now he had no one to talk to. Even Charfur was busy with his mate and kits. But Snowblaze couldn't blame him.

Soon the sky turned a forget-me-not blue and the cats around him began to stir. He quickly stood and shook out his fur, slipping out of the den before anyone woke up.

Emberbreeze was lying near the edge of camp devouring a shrew. He looked away and went to lounge in a spot of weak morning sunlight. As he groomed out his fur, his campmates began to wake around him.

Rainwhisker and Robintalon emerged from the warriors' den, discussing something quietly between themselves. Flameclaw, Oneclaw, Littletail, Badgerclaw, and Flowertail came next. They all crowded around their deputy as he began to hand out today's duties. Snowblaze stood and joined them.

"Littletail, you'll head the dawn patrol with Flowertail, Starnose, and Eaglepaw. Go and wake them now." Littletail nodded his head and stepped away to wake the mentor and apprentice.

"Snowblaze." He looked up in surprise at being called. "I want you to take a hunting patrol out this morning. You can take Rainwhisker, Meltwater, and Badgerclaw."

Snowblaze stopped listening as Flameclaw continued on. More warriors had crowded around, but Snowblaze's head was filled with happiness and a sense of responsibility. *This is the first patrol I've been in charge of!*

He still felt like a young warrior, but he supposed it was about time he had lead a patrol. He quickly looked around and caught the eye of Rainwhisker. The older tom padded over and joined him.

"Do you want me to gather the others?" he asked politely.

"O-okay, sure. Thank you."

Rainwhisker returned shortly with Meltwater and Badgerclaw close on his heels. Meltwater stopped a distance away and didn't look at him. Snowblaze rolled his eyes. Ever since that *one* day she had been blatantly ignoring him. Her and Mistshade were always whispering to each other and glaring at him when he was around. *I don't understand! But I don't have time for disobedience.* He thought firmly.

"We're going to go hunting by the meadow," Snowblaze meowed confidently. "The sun still isn't fully up, so the heat won't be too bad yet."

Badgerclaw nodded in agreement and Meltwater put her nose in the air, but she didn't object. Rainwhisker looked at Snowblaze

apologetically. The young tom shrugged his shoulders and lead his patrol out into the forest.

The grasshoppers and cicadas were already buzzing loudly around them. The sun was just breaching the horizon and it seemed to Snowblaze that ever leaf was outlined in the golden light. It was beautiful and he inhaled the scents of the forest around him. He was a warrior of EmeraldClan and he was leading his own patrol!

There was a warm breeze blowing gently around them and through the trees, promising another hot day ahead. It had been very warm recently as new leaf gave way to green leaf. There hadn't been rain in two moons now, nearly three. The plants were green around them, but they weren't lush. They dropped sadly, searching for any relief against the hot green leaf sun. The stream that usually chattered through the forest down from the Rocky Hills, now only trickled lightly.

Snowblaze turned to make sure his cats were still following as they neared the stream that he would follow towards the meadow. They were still there, close behind.

"Let's stop to take a drink quickly. I feel like we're going to dry out like these bushes if the rain doesn't come soon." He looked over at a poor young maple sapling, its leaves drooping to the ground.

He and the rest of his patrol stooped to lap at the cold mountain water and then they continued on. As they neared the meadow, Badgerclaw had wandered off, following the scent trail of a grouse. Soon after Meltwater left claiming she wanted to hunt elsewhere.

Snowblaze had let her go, knowing that there was nothing he could say to keep her with the group. She had a bitterness towards him that he couldn't understand. She always used to be polite, but it seemed as if Mistshade had turned her away from him. He ground his teeth in a frustrated way at the thought.

"She's really not that bad," Rainwhisker assured him.

"She hates me! But I have no clue why," Snowblaze rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to scent the air.

"She doesn't hate you, really. She's just upset that you hurt Mistshade. They're close friends and she's just looking out for her."

Snowblaze snapped his jaws shut and looked at his fellow clanmate in confusion.

"When did I hurt Mistshade? She's the one who's been avoiding me! And muttering about me and glaring at me every time I walk by."

"Oh I don't know if I should say," Rainwhisker scuffed the ground with a forepaw. The ground was dry and dust floated up into the air around them.

"Well you have to tell me now. I have no idea what I did."

"Well," he began reluctantly. "Meltwater said that Mistshade thinks that you like Flowertail more than her." Quickly he added, "but that's only what Meltwater has told me, I didn't hear any of this from Mistshade herself."

Like Flowertail more than Mistshade? He thought in puzzlement. *But they're both my friends, what does it matter who I like more?*

Rainwhisker noticed the far-away look in Snowblaze's eyes as he thought about what the tom had told him.

"You mean you don't know?" he asked quietly.

Snowblaze looked back at Rainwhisker. "Know what?"

Rainwhisker rolled his bright blue eyes and snorted as he laughed. Snowblaze narrowed his own eyes. He didn't like to be made fun of. His clanmate noticed and composed himself.

"Sorry. It's just, you two were beginning to become closer. You really had no idea that Mistshade liked you?"

"What?" Snowblaze's head spun. He was given so much information he didn't know how to handle it. He did like the grey she-cat. And he did miss her now that she didn't share prey or share tongues with him anymore. *Do I like her more than a friend?*

"I've said too much already, we should get on with our hunt." Rainwhisker turned away and sniffed the air. He began to pad along a scent trail, but Snowblaze couldn't let him go without knowing more.

"Wait! Rainwhisker, you said *liked*. Does she still like me?" Snowblaze's body was stiff with anxiety as he waited for the answer. The light brown tom turned and shrugged.

"I don't really know. But you shouldn't ask me, you should ask her yourself." He turned away again and wound around a bundle of ferns and disappeared.

Snowblaze scratched the ground in frustration with unsheathed claws. How could he have been so blind? He shook out his pelt and scattered dust into the air once more. He had discovered that he had indeed hurt someone who he could have become close with and now his hunting patrol had completely split up. He felt like he had failed miserably.

"The only thing I can do right now is hunt," he told himself firmly. "I can't fix what Mistshade and I might've had, so no sense in thinking about it right now."

With that off his chest he finally stopped to listen to the birds chirping around him. A particularly loud robin called out from a branch above his head. He looked up and saw its red chest puffed out at it sang into the hazy air.

Slowly Snowblaze began to climb the back of the tree, digging his sharp claws into the bark. His muscles pulled him up slowly and silently until he reached the first branch. His prey continued to sing, unaware of the threat.

Snowblaze leaped branch by branch until he was on one just below the robin. He bunched his muscles under himself and poised to spring. As the little brown bird took in another breath he leaped up and snagged a claw in its tail feathers. Snowblaze landed and balanced on the branch he leaped from as he pulled the robin down into his jaws. The robin let out a screech as he crunched loudly and his teeth sunk in and broke bones.

Triumphantly he climbed back down and buried his fresh kill between the roots of the tree. He used this hunt to distract himself from all his problems, however minor they may be in the grand scheme of things.

On his way back to camp with the robin and a small mouse between his teeth, he spotted Meltwater and Rainwhisker weaving through the undergrowth ahead. He hurried his step to catch up to them. Rainwhisker nodded respectfully as Snowblaze passed them to once again lead his patrol. Meltwater simply ignored them. Both had caught prey.

As they neared the bramble wall Badgerclaw joined back with the patrol with a huge black squirrel. They entered the camp together and placed their fresh kill on the pile in the shade of a clump of ferns. Snowblaze felt proud as the sun warmed his pelt.

The camp around him was buzzing with activity. The two apprentices were running around practicing battle moves. Sparklekit was watching with interest from the nursery. Lizardbelly lay nearby grooming her belly fur and Shrewkit lay nestled against her back. Sleetstar was talking with Flameclaw, Littletail, and Starnose; probably about their patrol this morning.

Then Snowblaze caught Mistshade's eye as she was slipping out of the camp and into the forest behind Snaketail, and Charfur. He stood frustrated. He would have to talk to her later and apologize.

As the day wore on and the sun climbed higher into the sky the earth continued to warm. Snowblaze could see the heat waves rising off the scorched earth where the sun struck it in the centre of the camp. Most cats were lying in any shade they could find. The air was pressing down heavily promising a storm. It couldn't come soon enough.

"Cloudwhisker can you bring Eaglepaw and Leafpaw to the stream to collect water?" Moonbeam asked calmly. "Lizardbelly and the elders need water, but they can't travel far."

"Of course Moonbeam," the medicine cat apprentice nodded. She gathered the two younger warrior apprentices to her and headed

out to gather water. Just thinking about a ball of wet moss made Snowblaze's mouth dry. He licked his lips and stood slowly, deciding to join them for a drink.

But as Snowblaze took a step out of the shade, Cloudwhisker turned sharply with her nose in the air. The two apprentices took no notice and kept walking, until the whole camp heard the white she-cat yell, "Moonbeam!"

He looked up at her curiously and he dropped the herbs he was sorting.

"I can smell something. It smells dangerous, I just have a feeling," she continued worriedly. Snowblaze pricked his ears; it wasn't often that the young cat was so focused and intense. Moonbeam opened his jaws to taste the air.

There was a slight tinge to the stagnant air around them. It lay thick and heavy and carried a bitter and cloying smell. Snowblaze couldn't place a paw on what it was, but he watched as Moonbeam's ears folded back almost immediately and his pelt ruffled in fear.

Thunder rumbled in the distance as dark storm clouds barrelled quickly towards them across the sky, beginning to hide the sun. The gully was gradually growling darker and darker.

"Cloudwhisker, gather everyone you can. Check every den, nook and cranny. We can't have anyone left behind. Gather them at the entrance tunnel. I must find Sleetstar."

"What's going on?" she asked him, worry in her mew.

"There's a fire!" he yowled urgently.

Chapter 16

Fire! Alarm ripped through Snowblaze's mind. He had never seen fire before, but he knew of its deadly powers to destroy forests, tear cats from their homes, and sometimes from their lives.

Moonbeam whipped around and clawed his way up the Great Maple to their leader's den. Snowblaze felt a chill run down his spine despite the heat slowly pressing in on their camp.

"You heard him too," Cloudwhisker yowled at him, her green eyes were wide with urgency. "Don't stand there, help me!"

Seemingly his paws unstuck from the ground and he turned towards the nursery. Nosing his way in through the prickly wall, he spotted Lizardbelly, Sparklekit, and Shrewkit curled up asleep.

"Lizardbelly, wake up," he meowed loudly. Startled she lifted her head and Sparklekit tumbled out of their nest and a flurry of paws and tail.

"What? You woke me, I don't appreciate that," she scolded as she bundled her kit towards her belly once more. Sparklekit began to suckle sweetly, but Snowblaze needed to get them out of there.

"You need to leave with all of us. Carry Sparklekit and I'll carry Shrewkit and meet the Clan by the entrance tunnel."

"Why?" Panic pricked her mew as she picked up on the urgency in his voice.

"Don't panic, but there's a fire. We don't know how close it is, but we need to get out of here." Snowblaze tried to stay calm. He knew that panic wouldn't help their situation.

Lizardbelly's black and white fur bunched up in fear and she stood abruptly, dislodging both of her kits. Sparklekit huffed and tumbled away out of the nest again.

"Come Sparklekit, I want to take you on an adventure," she chimed calmly. The young kit looked up in excitement, her tiny tail sticking straight up into the air.

"Where are we going mother?"

"Am I coming too?" Shrewkit asked in a tiny voice.

"Yes, you're coming," Snowblaze soothed. "I'll take you with us." He stooped and grabbed the young grey kit's scruff in his mouth.

"You'll see soon enough," her voice faded as they exited the nursery. Snowblaze followed and saw most of his clan gathered together uneasily. Sleetstar stood in front of them urging everyone to stay calm. But suddenly Swiftear burst out from the group.

"We can't stay here, what are we doing standing around?" His voice shook with terror. Snowblaze could see the whites of his eyes, and it unnerved him. He followed the mother and kit towards the group and heard Sleetstar counting.

"...Flameclaw, Littletail, Specklepelt, Eaglepaw, Leafpaw, Emberbreeze, Snowblaze..."

Snowblaze quickly placed Shrewkit down beside his mother. The young ginger and white tom looked around and noticed the group seemed a little thin.

"We're missing warriors," Sleetstar observed. "We are going to gather at the rock where our territory meets SapphireClan's near the lake. Hopefully the fire will stay away from there. Littletail and Badgerclaw, I need you to find Snaketail, Charfur, Mistshade, Flowertail, and Oneclaw."

The senior warriors nodded solemnly.

"Find them and bring them to the lake safely."

They sped off, crashing through the undergrowth in haste.

"The rest of you, follow me. Snowblaze, Emberbreeze, and Robintalon, help the elders. Starnose, help Lizardbelly with her

kits." His grey and white pelt gave away his anxiety even though his voice sounded calm. He stood tall and commanding and everyone filed out behind him.

Snowblaze stepped in beside Swiftear and he grumbled angrily.

"I don't need a young cat's help, I can manage on my own!"

Snowblaze dipped his head respectfully, but walked beside him at a distance. He had to nudge him forward occasionally as the smell of smoke thickened in the air.

The clan sped as fast as they could through the thick wilting undergrowth towards the lake. But the clouds moved faster overhead and soon the forest was so dark, Snowblaze could barely see a whisker in front of him.

He tripped and painfully twisted a paw on a root. He hissed with pain, but he had to keep moving. His leg ached every time he stepped on it. Swiftear walked closer to Snowblaze now, their pelts brushing. He could smell the fear scent rolling off the elder in waves, and the stink of his breath as he panted with distress.

Snowblaze himself was filled with dread, but he tried to control his breathing as leaves and branches whipped him in the muzzle.

"Stay together!" He heard Sleetstar calling from somewhere up ahead. Snowblaze could hear the worried breathing of cats all around him. At least he knew they were together.

His thoughts raced for the cats that were missing. *Flowertail! And Mistshade and Charfur! I can't wait around for them to come home safe.*

Thunder rumbled ominously overhead. Snowblaze could hear the crackle of flames as it ate the plants and leaf mould in its path. He pushed the elder forward and they stumbled through the forest together. He didn't dare turn to look behind them.

Snowblaze could soon make out a huge dark mass looming up in front of him. It must be the rock! They were safe at last.

"Swiftear, can you see the rocks up ahead?" he asked out of breath.

"Just because I'm old doesn't mean I can't see!" he rounded on him, his stuffy breath clouding in the young tom's face.

"I know you can see. Can you make it up there with the rest of the Clan?"

"Why? Where are you going?" he asked, concern in his mew. But it wasn't concern for Snowblaze, it was concern for his own well being.

"I need to help look for the others. You'll be safe with everyone up on the rock, but I can't stay here and wait while there are cats still in the forest."

Before Swiftear could reply, he turned and fumbled through the forest back towards the camp.

He heard Sleetstar call out to the cats behind him, clustered on the rock face. He was going to help look for the missing cats too. Snowblaze hurried so as not to get caught by his leader. He didn't want to be discovered and sent back to wait. He *had* to help.

The world around him was so dark now he had to feel his way around. If it was from the clouds, the smoke, or both he couldn't tell. But the thick bitter scent choked his lungs and his eyes streamed from the burning air. His paw was sore, but he couldn't give up until he found every one of them.

The flames crackled and began to light up the trees around him. He could see, in the not too far distance, fire racing up tree trunks and devouring everything in its path. *The earth is so dry, there's nothing stopping it!*

A shadow pelted away beside him and Snowblaze turned to look. Cream fur streaked through the leaves and two darker pelts followed. *Flowertail! And Badgerclaw and Oneclaw.*

Relief washed through his veins as he watched the three run towards the lake. But it lasted only a fleeting moment as he realized the other group was still missing. He screwed up his eyes and stubbornly walked forward.

I can't leave them behind. Not Charfur. Not Mistshade!

His heart raced as he began to run, searching in vain for these cats he held so important in his life. He didn't dare try and scent the air in fear of breathing in too much smoke.

Suddenly he heard voices raised nearby. He slowed and stepped around an oak trunk. What he saw made him shrink away; somehow he felt afraid to be discovered.

"This is your fault! All of it!" Emberbreeze shouted into the thick air. Her voice rang with rage and sadness. Snowblaze's eyes widened and he hoped he was hidden enough behind the tree.

Emberbreeze had Sleetstar cornered against a wide tree. Roots snaked above their heads on both sides; this section of the ground was hollowed out lower than the rest. She had him trapped.

What is she doing? This seems so wrong.

"You're just a coward who can't do anything on his own. You sent cats to their deaths!" Her teeth were bared in a snarl. "You killed my parents!"

Sleetstar's ears were pressed against his head, tail tucked between his legs, as he cowered in front of the pissed off she-cat. She had a paw raised slightly with claws unsheathed. In this moment she looked terrifying. But it pained Snowblaze to see his leader look so helpless.

"This is not my fault," he tried to bargain. "We all live our lives knowing that some day we're going to die. We are warriors. We live and die for our clans."

Emberbreeze halted a moment. Snowblaze couldn't clearly see her face from this angle. He crept forward slowly to get a better view.

Will I have to stop this, or will she see reason?

"Your parents knew this going into it. They agreed to this when they vowed to protect the clan when they became warriors. I was there. I heard them say it."

Please see reason.

"They didn't agree to die doing something pointless!" Emberbreeze raged and reared up on her hind paws. Her tail whipped behind her and her white sharp claws contrasted on the dark tree bark behind them.

This can't happen!

Snowblaze raced forward his breath coming in short gasps, his paws tearing up the ground beneath him.

"Stop!"

His sister halted as she was caught in surprise. But her claws came down all the same and raked Sleetstar's muzzle. He yowled in rage and suddenly rose intimidatingly.

"Emberbreeze, please stop! You don't know what you're doing," Snowblaze pleaded despairingly. She ripped her gaze away from Sleetstar to turn and glare at her brother.

"You-" she began but was cut off as Sleetstar pinned her to the ground, claws keeping a firm hold on her. She snarled up at him, but he wouldn't let her move.

"Sleetstar," Snowblaze began. He stopped talking when Sleetstar fixed an intense disapproving glare on him. He shrunk knowing he would be in trouble.

"Did you know?" he asked.

"No!" he tried in vain to sound convincing. He really didn't know what she was up to, but he did know how disrupted her mind had been recently. "I didn't know Sleetstar."

Emberbreeze struggled under his big paws, but she was growing weak and began to cough. The flames were getting closer. The forest around them was glowing with an orange light and heat was sparking at the tips of Snowblaze's fur. Snowblaze was afraid he would burst into flames.

Suddenly the grey tom's gaze was distracted as cats rushed past, fleeing the fire. Snowblaze turned to see what Sleetstar was looking at. *Snaketail, Littletail, and Charfur.* Then a lithe grey shape followed quickly behind. *Mistshade!* Snowblaze's chest felt light with relief at seeing the grey she-cat race to safety.

"Snaketail!" Sleetstar roared. The tom swerved and skidded to a halt in the small clearing. Confusion clouded his gaze as he took in the scene in front of him.

"Take Emberbreeze to the rocks. Make sure she doesn't escape. I will explain later."

The snarling tom gladly obliged. He grasped her scruff between his teeth and roughly swung her around. His muscles overtook her diminishing strength and he dragged her towards the lake. She refused to be dragged and clawed at Snaketail until he let her go. He snarled at her, but she stood and began to walk proudly away as he followed.

Snowblaze's heart broke as he watched his sister taken away forcefully. He couldn't look away, but the smoke made tears blur his vision.

"Come Snowblaze, we must hurry."

He looked up and saw his leader, blood crusting above his nose. However peaceful he always had seemed, at this moment he looked like a truly hardened warrior. Snowblaze couldn't help but feel an inkling of fear. He didn't know if it was from Sleetstar or from the situation they had found themselves in. There was so much going on Snowblaze couldn't think properly.

The trees groaned and creaked above their heads as the group of cats scurried away from their burning home. The heat stifled Snowblaze's breath and his lungs screamed for fresh air. He began to stumble and cough. Charfur nudged him forward and he regained his balance.

"Hurry," his old mentor rasped.

The branches of the trees above their heads were smouldering. Immediately behind Snowblaze a limb crashed to the ground. Sparks flew from it and embedded themselves in his fur. The little flickers of fire burned his skin, but quickly sputtered out. He was safe for now, but he had to keep running.

Thunder boomed above again, louder this time.

They all scrambled up the rock face in a desperate struggle. Mistshade cursed as she tore a claw, but she didn't stop until she was safe on the rock away from the tree line.

They lay panting, Snowblaze gulped in all the air he could. A swift crisp breeze blew off the lake and the coolness of it soothed his aching lungs.

"Are we all here?" Sleetstar called out weakly.

Flameclaw hurried forward with Moonbeam close behind.

"We're all here, thank StarClan!" the deputy responded. Moonbeam snuffled around the bedraggled group and sighed in relief.

"None of you are hurt thank StarClan. You'll be sore and tired for a while after breathing in all that smoke though. I'd like to keep an eye on all of your breathing." The large medicine cat departed and went back to convene with Cloudwhisker.

Snowblaze's breath rattled as he breathed in and out slower now and his heart began to calm.

Suddenly the storm broke above them and the clouds wept fat drops of rain. It seeped through the poor cats' fur and chilled them all to the bone. The breeze off the lake was icy and they huddled together for warmth.

But, Snowblaze thought, *this is better than fire. At least we are all safe.*

His mind quieted as he sunk onto the bare sharp rock, but he didn't care. He felt Mistshade curl up beside him, pressing her drenched pelt into his. He looked up at her and he saw relief and longing in her gaze.

"Snowblaze," she began. "I'm so glad you're safe. I was worried about you the whole time."

"I was worried about you too," he exclaimed joy bursting from his heart. "I couldn't think. I had to make sure you were safe."

She began to purr and nuzzled her nose into his chest fur. He didn't realize how much he did enjoy her company until now. Until he held her close and could breath in her scent and could feel her heart beating next to his own.

"I'm sorry-" he began, but was cut off as shouts of anger suddenly rang out through the night. Snowblaze lifted his head. His eyes were half closed against the pounding rain.

"Sleetstar!" one of them called.

Their leader stumbled towards the edge of the rock and peered over the edge, the rest of his clan following curiously.

"Tawnystar," he greeted politely. "We need shelter from the rain and the fire. Will you put aside your qualms and help your fellow warriors?"

The rest of EmeraldClan bunched around their leader and looked down onto the SapphireClan cats. Tawnystar was surrounded by her warriors, who looked furiously up at the enemy clan.

"We would never shelter mouse-hearts!" yowled one.

"You're still crossing our border, we can smell you almost every day!" called another.

The EmeraldClan warriors were taken aback and let out mews of protest. Sleetstar calmed them and looked down on Tawnystar. He composed himself before speaking.

"*If* there is one of our cats crossing your border, I may have found out who it is. Rest assured they will be punished." His eyes narrowed. He didn't give any more away.

"Good," the tawny leader replied. "But that's not quite good enough.

You are already on SapphireClan territory. You may stay up there until the morning, or until the fire dies out, which ever comes first. I will have guards posted."

Sleetstar dipped his head politely, but Snowblaze saw fury smouldering in his eyes. When he lifted his head to look upon his clan, his blue eyes were calm once more, not giving anything away.

"You heard her. Though it seems unfair, we are on her territory. We will stay here until it is safe to return home."

Yowls of outrage filled the air and bounced off the raindrops. How could a leader be so cold? Their home was ablaze and they were stranded in the rain! Snowblaze just hoped that the downpour would put the fire out soon.

He could still see smoke rising up out of the trees, but the closest fires were sizzling now as they were doused by the storm.

"How will we ever return home?" Stiffwhisker asked despairingly. "What if there is no home to return to?"

The two apprentices looked up at her in fear. They were pressed against each other pitifully. Specklepelt scooted over and curled her body around them protectively. Cloudwhisker, Meltwater, Rainwhisker, and Robintalon were huddle together to keep out the chill. Their leader was talking to the senior warriors, but Snowblaze wasn't even interested. He was just tired and cold.

He glanced over at his sister sitting with her back to her clan. Snaketail was crouched nearby, his malicious gaze fixed on her, watching her every move. He knew that she was too proud to cower or beg.

"Snowblaze, I think you should rest. I'll try mybest to keep you out of the rain," Mistshade spoke softly beside him. He yawnedand reluctantly closed his eyes, thankful to have her at his side once more.

Chapter 17

As the sky began to turn a lighter grey, three SapphireClan warriors scooted up the side of the rock. The deputy Watershine was in the lead with Snowclaw and Talonclaw following behind. They each carried prey in their jaws, and as they reached the top of the rock they tossed it towards the EmeraldClan leader.

He had been lying down and as one of the slimy fish landed near his face he jerked his head up. Nose twitching he asked, "what's this?"

"Tawnystar demanded we bring you something to eat, seeing as you're not allowed to hunt on our territory," Watershine declared loudly.

Sleetstar sat up and sniffed the fish. Nearby Sparklekit piped up in her tiny high pitched voice.

"It smells gross!" Her mother shushed her and Snowclaw's ears folded back.

"Be grateful you have anything at all!"

Flameclaw stepped up to the tom, nose to nose. "Thank you for this meagre offering of prey. Maybe it'll make up for the prey you stole from our territory." His voice was thick with sarcasm. Snowblaze couldn't believe the hostility emanating from the SapphireClan warriors. Snowclaw narrowed his eyes, but Watershine laid a tail on his shoulders, signalling their departure.

"Good luck," was all they had to say before they left to head back to their own camp. Sleetstar looked down at the prey they had offered. He sighed and called the elders forward.

"Are you able to share this fish?"

Swiftear looked down at it pitifully and grumbled. "It's dry. Aren't

fish supposed to live in water?" He pawed at it angrily, but he picked it up and brought it over to the overhang where the elders were sheltering.

The rest of the prey was rationed out. Charfur, Lizardbelly, and their kits shared a small mouse. The apprentices and the youngest warriors, Snowblaze included, shared a squished fledgling. The last scuffed up rabbit was shared between Sleetstar, Moonbeam, Cloudwhisker, and the elder warriors.

It was hardly a mouthful each between every cat, but Snowblaze savoured what he could. Who knows how long it would be before prey returned to the forest. He had noticed, unfortunately, that his sister wasn't given a share. Snowblaze took his last bite and snuck quietly over to her.

"Here Emberbreeze, it's not much, but it's all we had." He dropped the mouthful at her feet. She looked down at it gratefully and gently chewed it and swallowed.

"Thank you Snowblaze."

He ducked his head and an awkward silence followed. Snowblaze's mind raced at what to say. After what he had seen his mind was drawing a blank. He hadn't talked to her since the incident.

She was the one to break the silence. "Do you hate me?" Her yellow eyes were swimming.

"I-I don't think I could ever hate you."

"But you don't trust me," she said matter-of-factly. He looked into her eyes and knew he couldn't lie to her.

"I'm not sure if I do or not. I just don't understand what you were thinking. Were you planning something like this?"

She sighed. "For a long time I was so angry about our parents that I didn't know what to do. I couldn't sleep and I only ate to keep my strength up. I blamed Sleetstar. He was the one who had sent them away and they had trusted him. After they didn't come home I knew I couldn't trust him. Someone with that much disregard for life

wasn't fit to be a leader. I couldn't just be an ordinary warrior and do nothing about the way I felt." Her white fur was spiked in agitation. "I don't know if I should tell you more. You know how I feel at least."

Snowblaze took a deep breath. He had no idea his littermate had felt this strongly. He knew that she had been upset about their parents, but her distrust of Sleetstar wasn't something he could relate to.

If only she had told me, I could have helped! Somehow...

"Whatever happens now, please don't ever hate me. I know I avoided you and I was cold toward you, but I do love you. I just didn't want you to be wrapped up in the trouble I would eventually bring."

"I would have tried help and you know it! Why didn't you let me?" Snowblaze asked desperately. He needed to know once and for all.

"I saw how you had moved on and I didn't know how to do that. But you seemed happy. And you have Mistshade now, I didn't want you to be torn between her and I."

"It wouldn't have even been a choice." But as he said that he thought about the real answer. Emberbreeze was his kin. She had been with him through everything, especially through the hardest part of his young life.

But soon after he was on his own. And now Mistshade meant so much to him. Even though their relationship was new, he didn't want to be apart from her. He loved her in a different way. It was a love that burned deep within his heart.

"I can see the conflict in your eyes," his sister said softly. She flicked his ears with her tail and forced a smile on her face. "I know that you love her. You don't need me anymore mouse-brain."

Snowblaze tried to smile back, but his heart was so heavy. *What were they going to do to Emberbreeze? I know she was in the wrong, but I love her! She's all I have left of my kin...* He licked her ears

comfortingly and left her on her own.

He wandered back towards Mistshade, but she was talking to Meltwater, Robintalon, and Rainwhisker. Snowblaze didn't have the energy to pretend to be okay. He avoided them and walked towards the edge of the rock where the waves splashed up its side.

He sat on the sharp stones and looked out into the lake. It was frothing as the waves crashed towards the shore. The wind blew mist up into his eyes and he narrowed them to keep the wind and rain out. As he shifted he dislodged a stone and it tumbled down the rock face and into the gushing water.

How far down is it?

He stood and closed his eyes, breathing in the fresh lake water air.

"Hey!" a stern voice called from nearby. He jolted his eyes open and swayed violently in the wind. Suddenly the realization of how close he was to the edge hit him and he panicked.

He gasped as he lost his footing, but sharp teeth embedded in his scruff and he was hauled backwards. Snowblaze lay panting, wide eyed.

"What were you thinking?" He knew that voice. He looked up and saw Mistshade glaring down at him. "You almost fell off the edge!"

"I'm sorry," he gasped, catching his breath. "You saved me."

"Of course I did fluff-brain! I saw you talking with Emberbreeze and then you walked over here to the edge of the rock. I thought you might need someone to talk to," she said softly. Then more forcefully she added, "And then you stood and swayed and I thought you were going to fall!"

Snowblaze closed his eyes and tried to forget the waves below. "I'm sorry," he said again. Mistshade just sighed loudly. He felt her lean close and then her warm tongue was licking his cheek in a comforting way. He leaned into her warmth.

"What were you doing?" she asked quietly. "Are you okay?"

Snowblaze took a moment to gather his thoughts. He didn't know if he was okay or not. So much had happened in the last day, he could barely process it. His home was burned by fire, his sister had threatened their leader, and now he wasn't sure what was going to happen.

Sighing he said, "I couldn't tell you one way or the other. My brain is so mixed up right now." He felt the she-cat stiffen beside him. Quickly so as not to offend her, he added, "not that I don't want to tell you! I just don't know where my thoughts are right now. But I'm grateful to have you with me."

He leaned up and nuzzled her cheek. Mistshade relaxed into him and began to purr. "I'll always be here as long as you want me," she said in a soft and loving voice.

"I'll always want you." He stood and entwined his tail with hers and brushed up against her side.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you too."

He and Mistshade joined the others huddled together. Every clanmate around him was either sleeping fitfully or watching the forest slowly smoke. Charfur was padding across the rock with urgency in his step.

"What's wrong Charfur?" Snowblaze called him over. Once his old mentor approached, he saw worry in the depths of his eyes.

"It's Shrewkit, he's not well. Do you know where Moonbeam is?"

"I saw him by the elders," the young tom pointed to his direction with his tail. Charfur nodded gratefully and hurried over to find Moonbeam. He watched as the two toms hurried back to Lizardbelly and the medicine cat huddled over the tiny grey body of Shrewkit. Snowblaze could hear Lizardbelly's voice rise in agitation.

"He'll be okay thought right? Moonbeam?"

The medicine cat sat straight and looked her in the eye. He spoke

low, so Snowblaze couldn't hear, but the fur lifting on Lizardbelly's spine, showed it wasn't good. He looked to Mistsahde and saw her eyes were concerned for the little kit.

He's so small, Snowblaze thought. *Please StarClan, let him live!*

Snowblaze lay with his head on his paws, watching his clanmates around him distractedly. He couldn't watch the worried parents any longer; he knew there was nothing he could do to help. His ears twitched as a voice sounded nearby.

"Sleetstar, should we go back now?" Flameclaw asked quietly. His thick ginger pelt was plastered to his sides, making him look thin and tired. Sleetstar looked at his deputy exhaustion showing through the slump of his shoulders.

"Yes, you're right Flameclaw. But before we send everyone back, I want you to take Oneclaw and Starnose to determine the extent of the damage," he said wearily.

"I will Sleetstar. I hope we can come back with good news." He dipped his head respectfully and left with the other two cats. Snowblaze sighed. He wanted to go home and sleep in his nest. He imagined the soft comfort of moss and bracken. But at this point anything would be better than this hard black rock.

All night he could hear cats worrying about the fire and about their camp. But in the background, underneath everything else, he could hear them all whispering about what Emberbreeze could have done to be under guard.

Snowblaze didn't want to hear it anymore. It exhausted him and his hope at her being forgiven was basically diminished. He just wanted it to go away. He had closed his ears to it and turned his back to his sister. He didn't want to, but he didn't know how he could help her.

She didn't mean it, she can't have! He pleaded with himself. He wanted to forgive her, but he had seen her attack their leader with his own eyes. It was just so *wrong.* His heart strained with the weight that had been placed on it.

The storm clouds eventually did break and a watery sun-high sun shone down on the depressed and broken clan. They had cowered together, shivering on the rock, to gather what warmth from the bright orb that they could.

Paw steps sounded through the soaked leaves and Snowblaze pricked his ears as Flameclaw, Oneclaw, and Starnose clambered back up onto the rock. But his heart sank once again as he took in their somber expressions. They walked directly to Sleetstar and avoided to curious gazes of the rest of their clan.

Sleetstar hurried forward and greeted them quietly. Fortunately Snowblaze was close enough to hear their quiet conversation. He pricked an ear inquisitively.

"How was it?"

"It's not good, Sleetstar," Flameclaw responded dejectedly.

"A lot of forest is burned all the way from the Rocky Hills to our camp and it followed the border along the other two clans," Oneclaw added. "We didn't go into RubyClan territory, but it looked like it crossed over the border."

"But half of our camp is okay," Starnose spoke up, always trying her best to be positive. But her voice still sounded sad underneath it all. "The Great Maple is charred, but whole. The elders' den and the apprentice's den are okay. It's the warriors' den and the nursery that are gone. We will have to rebuild."

Sleetstar sunk to his haunches, defeated. Snowblaze understood all the pain. It's as if everything that could go wrong did go wrong. But it was still the beginning of green leaf. The forest would regrow. Starnose whisked her tail over her leader's shoulders in comfort.

"It looks bad." Mistshade spoke up as she noticed everyone's disheartened expressions around them.

"It can't be good," Snowblaze responded. "But I heard Starnose say half of the camp is okay, so it's salvageable at least."

"How could this happen? Where was StarClan while our home was

burning?" She sighed and turned her head away.

Littletail hurried over to Sleetstar. He mewed words of comfort to his littermate, but it did little. It was hard to see anything positive come out of this. Nonetheless Sleetstar stood and squared his shoulders as if getting ready to face what was ahead.

"Gather around everyone!" His voice echoed across the giant bare rock. In the silence that followed waves lapped against the side of the rock, calmer now that the storm had dissipated. Cats stood and gathered, ears pricked in hope and anticipation.

Flowertail and Badgerclaw came up and sat next to Snowblaze. Whitemoss guided her two denmates forward and the two apprentices cowered behind them. Snowblaze's heart was bursting with sympathy for the young cats. Specklepelt joined her kits and groomed them roughly, but comfortingly. Charfur guided Sparklekit to sit with the group, but Lizardbelly stayed where she was, licking Shrewkit to keep him warm.

"I'm cold!" Sparklekit mewed pitifully.

"I know dear, but we're going home soon," her father comforted her. He picked her up by the scruff and placed her on his feet to keep her off the icy rock. He began to lick the fur on her head backwards to warm her. Little mews escaped her mouth every time he licked too roughly.

"Well?" asked Snaketail brusquely from the back of the group. He was still guarding Emberbreeze.

Sleetstar lifted his head and took in every cat under his care, his blue eyes emotionless. "The fire has burned a lot of our forest."

Nervous whispers erupted from everyone. Snowblaze felt a chill run down his spine. He hoped everyone would have enough courage to return to camp and help rebuild.

"I've been told half of our camp is gone, but at least we have half that is safe. We can rebuild together!"

"We can do this," Flameclaw said loudly and reassuringly. He and

Sleetstar stood at the edge of the group as strong figureheads. They looked ready to carry all of their clans' troubles on their shoulders. Snowblaze felt proud to be a part of EmeraldClan.

"How bad is it?" asked Meltwater from the back. "I'm ready to help, but we should return knowing all we can know. I don't want surprises." Oneclaw, Rainwhisker, and Badgerclaw were nodding in agreement.

"Did any of you manage to check my herb stores?" Moonbeam asked apprehensively. His shoulders were tense, blue eyes alight with worry for the answer.

"We don't know, I'm sorry Moonbeam," Starnose responded. "But only half of the Great Maple was affected, I think your den might be okay."

"Okay." Moonbeam took a deep breath and called to his apprentice. "Cloudwhisker, can you run ahead and see what we're dealing with? We'll have to find places where the forest wasn't burned to gather more herbs."

"Yes Moonbeam. We're going to need lots of coltsfoot and juniper. I think a lot of us have smoke damage to our lungs." She looked around at the dishevelled group, everyone was wheezing or breathing heavily, Snowblaze included.

"My throat feels like it's on fire." Snowblaze's voice scraped in his throat. Flowertail flicked his ear with her tail.

"You sound like an elder!" she purred lightly. "No offence Stiffwhisker." Flowertail winked and the elder grunted noncommittally at her. Whitemoss laughed and nudged her friend. The comment seemed to have lifted everyone's spirits a little.

"Is anyone going to ask why Emberbreeze is being guarded?" Rainwhisker looked around innocently, but he had no idea how loaded his question really was. Snowblaze visibly cringed. He peeked back at his sister, but she was still sitting stone-like looking over the heads of everyone. She didn't even twitch a whisker.

"What happened?" added Flowertail. She padded over to her friend and asked curiously.

Emberbreeze twitched her white ears, but didn't look at her. "I'm sure Sleetstar will mention that soon." Nothing else was said and Flowertail didn't push it. She just sat next to her and eyed Snaketail suspiciously.

"I will explain everything when we get back to camp and survey the damage," Sleetstar sighed. He looked tired and older than before. His grey fur was dull and his whiskers drooped as he turned to lead his cats home and out of SapphireClan's territory.

"Let's go home," Flameclaw gathered everyone together, but Lizardbelly called out from where she lay over her kit.

"Wait!" Eyes turned toward her and no one spoke. Everyone knew the Shrewkit wasn't doing well. "We can't leave yet, Shrewkit needs to get better."

Moonbeam slowly padded over to the queen. His deep voice was gentle. "Lizardbelly, we have to go, staying in the wind won't help Shrewkit survive."

"But he's too weak!" she shouted pleadingly. After a moment, Moonbeam convinced her to carry the sickly kit back to camp. She licked Shrewkit to rouse him.

"Shrewkit, it's time to go home back to our nest."

She licked him more firmly, but he didn't move.

Oh no... Snowblaze thought with a broken heart. He heard Mistshade inhale sharply beside him. Starnose murmured something as Charfur placed Sparklekit on the ground next to her and raced over to his mate.

"Shrewkit!" Lizardbelly wailed into the cold air. "Shrewkit, wake up!"

Charfur bent over the little grey mound of fur and nosed his kit sadly. Then he leaned into Lizardbelly and drew his tail over her

shoulders. Their clanmates sat for a moment with their heads bowed as Lizardbelly's anguished wails echoed across the rock face.

As the sun fell farther toward the horizon, Sleetstar and Flameclaw finally rounded up their clanmates and convinced them to go home. Lizardbelly refused to leave Shrewkit behind and carried the stiffening body home. Sparklekit had been confused, and Charfur had to explain she wouldn't see her brother again.

He carried his last kit by the scruff as they leaped down onto the soggy ground. The rain and ashes had mixed and formed a pasty grey sludge that stuck in between Snowblaze's toes uncomfortably. He flicked a foot, but couldn't dislodge the muck.

"At least the sun is out. Maybe the forest will dry after all that rain," Starnose tried to stay positive, but Swiftear cut in snappishly.

"We're going to need more rain. That fire was only the beginning."

"I want more rain just to be safe," Leafpaw added. "That was so scary watching the trees smoke and burn." Her eyes looked haunted.

"Me too," Mistshade padded up quickly to walk beside Snowblaze. "Are you okay?" she asked him quietly.

"Yeah," he tried to sound light hearted. Even he could tell how his voice sounded dejected. Mistshade gestured with her muzzle to his sister and Snowblaze looked away. "It's nothing," he mumbled. "Sleetstar will deal with what happened."

"What did happen?"

Snowblaze's mind was conflicted. He wanted to confide in her so bad. He knew telling someone would help his mind. But he just couldn't. His paws dragged on the ground and all he said was, "Sleetstar will tell everyone."

"It's been a rough two days. We've got more work ahead of us, but I'll be beside you the whole time," Mistshade promised. Snowblaze nuzzled her cheek lightly and let out a broken purr.

They walked side-by-side, pelts brushing through the ragged

undergrowth. It dripped with the rain that had recently stopped. It was silent as they padded home, all the little creatures were silent after the blaze and the birds had flown far away.

IfI were a bird I would have flown away too. I still wish I could...

Chapter 18

Snowblaze gazed up into the watery blue sky and sighed internally. All the events that had passed had been hard, but what was to come would be harder. All of the leaves that weren't gone were shrivelled and brown as they clung for dear life onto the branches. They shivered delicately in the breeze; a wind any stronger would surely bring them spiralling to the ground.

They hadn't found any greenery and as they neared the camp they saw that half of the bramble barrier was gone. The bushes spiny branches scraped the air. Snowblaze felt exposed and he shivered.

Every cat walked slowly as they entered the camp and surveyed the damage to their once safe home. The brambles along the nursery side of the camp were absolutely gone, only small bare branches left. The nursery itself was gone, but the cave remained, bare and gaping. The warriors' den was obliterated.

Someone let out a thin wail, but Snowblaze's eyes were too tired to turn and see who it was. He stood with his mouth in a frown as he stared at where he used to sleep.

Moonbeam rushed past everyone and scooted into his den. He backed out soon after with Cloudwhisker following. Her white fur was streaked with ashes. They were muttering quietly to themselves, their heads bent in a serious way.

"Moonbeam, any good news?" Sleetstar asked as he began to pad into the centre of the camp. The sun was shining down as it began to reach the tops of the trees and it lit his fur turning it a brilliant gold and silver. Snowblaze turned his gaze and began to walk slowly around the clearing.

"Our herbs are intact, but some have shrivelled from the heat of the fire. We can salvage them, but I'm going to need the apprentices to help find more when the time comes."

They continued to talk, but Snowblaze's mind drifted. *How could this have happened? What did we do to deserve something like this?* This fire had been so unfair! But maybe things happened sometimes and StarClan couldn't do anything about it. Snowblaze hoped that the starry cats that they held in such high regard weren't behind something so heinous.

"How are we going to rebuild the nursery?" The tom's ears focused back on the voices around him.

"We'll have to find a part of the forest that wasn't affected and drag some brambles back to camp."

He continued to walk and scuff the ashes from his path.

"We're going to have to share the elder and apprentices' dens for now."

"Stiffwhisker won't like that!"

Snowblaze made it around to the Great Maple. He looked up at it. Half of its trunk was coated in black char and the bark was peeling away. The other half was okay. Thankfully the side that was saved was the side where Sleetstar had his den.

Just then his leader padded up to the old tree. It had stood strong and tall for generations, and despite the destruction, it remained. Sleetstar placed a paw on the burnt side and muttered, "StarClan will help heal us."

He took his paw away and looked up determinedly at the Great Maple. Cats were gathering around now, waiting to hear what their leader had to say. He leaped up to his perch and looked down on his sodden and heart broken clanmates.

"This isn't the end. We can restore our camp to its former glory. We need to work together. This fire hasn't destroyed us. It has only made us stronger!"

Cats were beginning to nod slowly as they took in their leader's uplifting words. They were looking stronger and more self-assured.

"I can help repair dens and delegate duties," Starnose spoke up. She looked determined and Snowblaze admired that.

"Thank you Starnose, I will leave that up to you," Sleetstar said gratefully. "And Flameclaw, I will trust you as always to divide us into hunting and border patrols. We need to keep up appearances of being strong. The other clans will think that the fire has weakened us and they might try to take advantage of that."

"Absolutely Sleetstar," Flameclaw responded. "We will definitely need hunting patrols, and lots of them, to keep our strength up."

Sleetstar nodded, and looked out over his camp proudly and with satisfaction. Snowblaze felt envious of his leader. He wanted to lead this clan too someday. He wanted to feel the camaraderie of loyal clanmates and he wanted to have the trust and faith of every cat around him. He wanted to be looked up to.

"Now then. This is the part where I tell you the bad news. I know you have all been talking amongst yourselves about Emberbreeze. I don't want to bring your spirits down, but what has happened must be said and dealt with."

Snowblaze felt a deep foreboding in his bones as if something more horrible than the fire were about to happen. He crouched in preparation for what their leader would say. Mistshade shuffled closer to him. This was the part of being a leader he didn't want.

"I must tell you of an omen that StarClan had given Moonbeam long ago." He paused and let the group of cats murmur amongst themselves. The elders were especially restless.

"Omens are never a good thing," rasped Whitemoss.

"We're done for if StarClan sent an omen to this clan," replied Stiffwhisker.

Nearby Charfur looked over to the elders gossiping about the horrific omens of the past and added, "we will be okay, this clan always survives. I'm sure this is nothing we can't handle."

"Quiet!" Sleetstar yowled from above. Immediately everyone

stopped talking, mouths agape and they huddled closer together in anticipation. Mistshade pressed up against Snowblaze's side in a comforting way, but he was focused solely on Sleetstar.

"Moons ago, StarClan had cursed this clan with an omen. They told Moonbeam of the way we were going to falter and how we would be crippled as a clan."

Hushed mews of discontentment rolled around the clearing. Moonbeam was sitting hunched over, not meeting the gazes of any cat. Sleetstar continued.

"They said; 'An ember blown carelessly in the breeze can engulf the whole forest in flame.'"

Cries of fear and outrage rang out into the air.

"It's true!" yowled one. "We've been crippled by fire!"

"Will we ever recover?"

This time Sleetstar let the rumours fly through the group below him. Snowblaze didn't understand what was going on. Why was he letting everyone assume the worst? Why wouldn't he just be straight up and tell everyone the truth?

Mistshade was rigid beside him and she looked up at him with scared blue eyes. "What's going to happen to us?" she whispered. But Snowblaze didn't have an answer. He just nuzzled the top of her head distractedly.

Sleetstar began to speak again as the voices quieted.

"We were warned of a danger, but I see now that the threat was posed for me! I was the one to be destroyed by the ember."

Confusion washed over his clanmates, but Snowblaze understood as fear coursed through his veins and threatened to choke him. He looked back towards the edge of the group. Emberbreeze was sitting there, head held high, as Snaketail guarded her.

The ember StarClan had spoken about was her. She had threatened

to kill Sleetstar as the fire raged around them. If it hadn't been for Snowblaze intervening who knows how far she could have gone. She had been blinded by rage, and guilt, and sadness.

"Tell us what you mean Sleetstar!" Whitemoss called up to him.

"I will tell you," he assured.

Everyone gazed up at him expectantly.

"While the fire was burning yesterday, after we had safely gathered on the rock, I had left the group to help search for the last patrol in the forest."

Nods of agreement rippled over the cats as they remembered the events from yesterday. Eyes around the clearing were haunted with the memories.

"I was racing through the forest and as I stepped around a tree I was confronted by a clanmate. They were angry and blinded by rage and grief. They couldn't see clearly what they were doing. I was threatened. They harbour a grudge that is unforgiveable."

Snowblaze crouched and folded his ears back, trying to block out every sound. By now cats were putting two and two together; this cat he was talking about must be Emberbreeze. Why else would Snaketail be guarding her?

"Emberbreeze, come forward." Sleetstar's voice rang loud and clear through the dead silent air surrounding the camp. Shocked gasps rose up as the clan cats split in two to let her pass between them.

She walked up to the foot of the Great Maple, head held high, not looking at anyone she passed. Hisses followed her as she walked slowly forward. Snowblaze watched her silently.

"How dare you threaten our leader?" Mistshade yowled at her from beside him. She was standing now, claws out threateningly. Snowblaze didn't have the heart to say or do anything, he just felt void of anything.

"This is blasphemous!" yowled Swiftear.

"How could you?" Emberbreeze stopped at this voice and looked over to Starnose sadly. She had become sort of like a mother to them after their parents had died. Emberbreeze just looked away and continued on.

Snowblaze felt pity for her as cats shouted in her face and shoved her around. His sister didn't utter a word as she was poked and prodded. Even Snaketail tripped her as she was walking through the throng of her clanmates. She stumbled and fell into a puddle with a face full of muddy water. Snowblaze winced and began to growl menacingly at Snaketail.

"Enough! I will not have my cats stoop as low as she." Sleetstar's booming voice echoed and his clanmates froze. They turned away begrudgingly and when Emberbreeze reached the tree roots she sat and groomed most of the muck off her face.

Please don't do anything horrible to her, please! Snowblaze willed silently. *She was misguided; she would never hurt another clanmate for real... would she?*

Snowblaze watched through narrowed eyes, he was nervous for what was about to happen. Mistshade was glaring at her, but as she noticed Snowblaze beside her, she calmed and licked the top of his head.

"I'm sorry this happened," she said to him calmly. "Whatever happens, I'll be there for you."

"I know," he muttered and closed his eyes as their leader began to speak again.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Sleetstar asked commandingly. After a brief pause, his littermate squared her shoulders and looked up at Sleetstar.

"I cannot defend myself against what you say. It's true I attacked you. When you left us up on the rock I followed you. After waiting so long I had to get my revenge. You're not fit to lead us."

Her accusation was met with shocked mews and uncertainty from

the cats around them. Rainwhisker looked confused, Badgerclaw and Oneclaw were glaring at her with hostility.

"As for the cat that was crossing the border into SapphireClan? I did that." Emberbreeze confessed with such certainty that it caught everyone off guard, including Snowblaze.

"What?" he whispered half to himself. *Why would she have done that, what's the point in that?*

Sleetstar composed himself and calmly asked, "why were you crossing into their territory? You know it is against the warrior code. But I suppose to you, none of it matters."

"There's no point in hiding it now. I will tell you everything."

Snowblaze screwed his eyes shut and sprang up in a last attempt to save his sister. "Emberbreeze wait!" She spun and looked at him with surprised eyes. "Don't..." he whispered sadly. "You don't have to confess to everything, they'll only hate you more. We can work this out." His heart was breaking as he said these words, because he knew nothing could be worked out. There was already so much harm done.

"There's no saving me and you know it." Her yellow eyes were pooling with sadness. "I love you, but there's no point in hiding any truth. This isn't for you Sleetstar," she growled up at him. "This is for the good of my clanmates, and for my kin."

"Snowblaze please," Mistshade tried to calm him. "You have to let her tell us everything. There's nothing you can do for her now." He slashed at the ground with frustrated claws. But he knew she was right, there was nothing he could have ever done for his sister. She had been lost since the day they lost their parents.

"I had been scoping out their territory." Emberbreeze began her confession. "I wanted to find a secret place where I could kill you myself. I was going to lure you across the border and fake it so it would seem like a SapphireClan warrior killed you. You are on your last life, aren't you?" she asked threateningly.

Moonbeam looked up sharply. "You didn't tell me." Sleetstar ignored this and continued to look down upon the mutinous cat below him.

"Why Emberbreeze? Why couldn't you just let it go?" Flowertail whined miserably. "You had so much to live for, but you just couldn't let it go."

"I couldn't let it go because it was such an unnecessary death. Sunpelt and Yellowleaf would still be alive if it weren't for this maggot ridden excuse for a leader!" she replied viciously. Flowertail flinched away from her friend's harsh words. The white she-cat looked back up to Sleetstar with scorn on her face. "And then, even after SapphireClan stole our prey, you didn't have the guts to launch an attack on them. You had to wait and cower, hoping that there wouldn't be a battle. You're weak."

"Watch how you talk about our leader," Flameclaw stood and bared his teeth at her. His ears were folded back and his tail was twitching; he was ready to attack.

"He may be your leader, but he isn't mine," she replied calmly. Not a whisker twitched to betray her fear.

"You're right, I am not your leader," Sleetstar interrupted their spat. "As a result of this mutiny, I can no longer safely house you here in this camp, nor in this clan. Emberbreeze; for the crimes you have committed, this is your exile. Never come back and never let any of my cats see you on our territory."

"That is fine," her clear mew rang out in the silence. "I could never truly follow a coward who sends cats to their death. I will be glad to leave you and the rest of these spineless cats who did not stand up to you when they should have."

Silence followed. No one bothered to defend the accusation coming from a cat they so deeply disrespected. Snowblaze stood suddenly, but he didn't know what to say. His mouth lay open, but no words came out. She couldn't leave! She was all he had left of his kin.

"Your words mean nothing here," Badgerclaw said calmly, barely hiding his rage. "Leave."

Emberbreeze stood, her white pelt smooth, as she coolly turned around and stalked out of the clearing. Snowblaze watched in horror, his eyes wide.

Wait! He yowled desperately in his head.

He felt a nose nudge his flank and he turned to see Mistshade looking up at him. He felt choked to see pity in her eyes. *She shouldn't feel pity for me!*

Snowblaze turned quickly back around only to glimpse the last of his sister's pristine white tail as she whisked it away forever.

"Good riddance," muttered Swiftear.

"She had never really fit in right," added Specklepelt. Her mate nodded, his claws glinting in the sun as he dug them into the scorched earth. Snowblaze didn't want to imagine what he would do to her if he ever found her anywhere on EmeraldClan territory.

He shuddered and turned towards the warriors' den. He heard Mistshade call out after him, but he didn't turn. He squeezed into the den and sunk into his littermate's nest, inhaling her scent for the last time. Tomorrow it would be stale. And each day after that, it would slowly disappear, until one day she would finally just be a memory.

Unfortunately she would be a bad memory for therest of his clan, but to Snowblaze she would always be his proud and confidentsister.

Chapter 19

A few lonely birds twittered in the bare trees as the late sunset lit the sky like fire. Clouds loomed over the horizon as night slowly pushed the day away. Snowblaze sat in the clearing and sighed, watching his clanmates gather beneath the Great Maple. Flameclaw was sitting by the roots of the tree talking to Oneclaw, Snaketail, and Charfur. Sleetstar sat along the branch with his tail hanging down. His expression was unreadable. Once everyone had settled, he began the meeting.

"Tonight is the gathering. In light of recent events, I don't want any of you talking too much about our insubordinate ex-clanmate. What Emberbreeze did is now in the past, and all we can do is thrive in her absence. I will be the judge on how much will be said tonight." Sleetstar's voice rang clear across the gully. Clanmates were nodding around Snowblaze as they accepted and saw the reason in their leader's words.

"I support Sleetstar," Flameclaw said loudly from where he sat. "We know how quickly rumours like to spread among the clans. We can't have the other two clans thinking we're weak." His eyes flashed a challenge, but no one opposed him.

Rainwshiker padded over to Snowblaze as Sleetstar called out the cats who would be going to the gathering tonight. Snowblaze looked up and saw sympathy and maybe pity in his friend's features.

"It's only been a couple days since she left. Are you okay?" he asked quietly.

Snowblaze nodded, hoping that he would be okay, because right now he didn't quite feel okay. Most cats were giving him a bit of distance, not sure how to comfort him. Snowblaze wasn't even sure that they were able to comfort him. How could they when they couldn't justify anything that his sister had done?

"Thank you," he meowed to Rainwhisker. The brown and white tom laid his tail comfortingly over his shoulders and Snowblaze felt a tiny spark of relief. At least he knew that he still had friends to support him. "I'm glad you don't think poorly of me after all of that."

"How could I?" Rainshiwker asked in surprise. "You've done nothing wrong. And I can understand why you felt sad that she left, despite everything. Love runs deep and whatever anyone thinks of her, no one will forget her easily. Especially you." Snowblaze felt him nuzzle his head in a calming way.

"You're a good friend, you know," Snowblaze mewed, feeling choked up. He caught the eye of Starnose as they all gathered together near the entrance tunnel. Her eyes sparkled with kindness.

"I know!" Rainshiwker purred. Mistshade and Robintalon trotted up to them, crowding around the two toms.

"Are you ready to go?" Robintalon meowed loudly skipping around the group. Her enthusiasm helped Snowblaze focus his mind on the gathering instead of on Emberbreeze and a little smile touched his lips as the group left for the Ravine.

They were the first clan to arrive and they settled themselves closest to the leaders' rocks. Sleetstar and Flameclaw left the group to talk quietly with their heads bent. Snowblaze sat between Mistshade and Starnose.

As the night slowly crept across the sky and stars began to twinkle, both RubyClan and SapphireClan entered the Ravine. Each clan sat away from each other, distancing themselves from their rivals. The tensions were high and suspicious glances lit all the cats' eyes. Mistshade shuffled closer to Snowblaze and pressed their pelts together.

"Let us begin," Tawnystar commanded from above. She sat stiffly as every cat in the Ravine turned to face the three leaders. "As you all know there was a small fire in our territories." Both RubyClan and EmeraldClan cats murmured in agreement. There were burned and bare trees showing over the lip of the Ravine. RubyClan had been

touched with the fire as badly as EmeraldClan.

Tawnystar continued after the mutterings died down. "Our clan however has avoided the damage of the fire. Thanks to StarClan, our territory has been untouched." Her eyes glittered as shouts rang out from EmeraldClan.

"It's not with the blessing of StarClan, it's because your territory is as cold as your hearts!" Speckleheart yelled out from behind Snowblaze. He himself felt angered by Tawnystar's words as well. *They couldn't even help us when our home was burning! And now they sit there with smug looks on their faces.* Heat boiled his blood and he could feel his mate's fur spiking in rage beside him.

"You left our whole clan hungry and out in the rain!" Mistshade yowled with anger. "You allowed one of our kits to *die!*"

Cindertail stood nearby and slipped his claws out as he snarled at Mistshade's accusation. Snowblaze stood and met his eyes, not backing down.

"Don't test me," Snowblaze roared in response to his advance. He stood put a paw in front of his mate as if to protect her. The large SapphireClan warrior took a step forward and now the two clans were face to face with bristling fur.

"Stop!" Tawnystar raised her voice above the snarls below. Snowblaze gave one final spit at Cindertail, but turned to face Tawnystar to see if she could even begin to justify her actions.

"Do you deny what my clan has said?" Sleetstar asked expressively. Even he could not keep his tail from bushing with irritation.

"I do not." Tawnystar sat and looked down with an arrogant expression on her face. Roars of outrage burst forth from the EmeraldClan cats.

"You're a coward!" Robintalon yelled, spitting at her disrespectfully.

"Coward?" the SapphireClan leader had an incredulous laugh in her voice. "If anyone is a coward, it's your own leader Sleetstar. I have not forgiven you or your clan for trespassing on our territory, and

you didn't even have the resolve to admit it. And then you trespass again during the fire. Why should I or my clanmates feed or protect you?"

"We had nowhere else to go!" Sleetstar said loudly and with exasperation. "Our home was ablaze, what did you expect us to do? A real leader would help where they can. But I guess you can't even expect that from SapphireClan." He spat the last words with such contempt that Snowblaze could feel his leader's resentment. Wingstar sat on the lower rock, not saying anything.

"I know StarClan wouldn't have accepted your decision, Tawnystar, had you asked them for guidance," Moonbeam spoke up. It was uncharacteristic of him, but clearly this argument had touched every EmeraldClan cat personally. They had never been more vulnerable on that rock, facing the elements as the trees in their territory smouldered.

SapphireClan's medicine cat, Rainpelt, sat motionless and hid his eyes. Snowblaze couldn't help but think that he agreed with Moonbeam, but didn't want to speak against his leader.

"Who are you to say what StarClan will or won't accept?" she sneered. "You don't speak for them."

"I am EmeraldClan's medicine cat, that's who." His shoulder fur began to rise in annoyance. "All of us medicine cats have a special relationship with StarClan. We would be the first to know what they would think of your decision."

Tawnystar merely rolled her eyes as translucent clouds began to drift slowly over the full moon. "All I have to say is watch your back Sleetstar. Either find some nerve and admit your wrongdoings or you'll find out what StarClan really thinks." Her soft and ominous words drifted across the Ravine. Sleetstar's ears folded back at the threat and EmeraldClan hissed at Tawnystar and her clanmates.

Kestrelfur and Crumblerock took a pace towards Snaketail and Charfur who had their claws out and their ears back. There would be a fight any moment, and Snowblaze was ready and welcome to it. All of the anger, hurt, and loss that he had felt over the last few

days bubbled up and he couldn't, and didn't want to, force it down.

"Enough!" Wingstar called out as the clearing was plunged into darkness. Snowblaze's eyes adjusted to the light quickly. No one from either clan backed down. RubyClan was sitting on the sidelines, just taking in everything around them. Snowblaze was glad they weren't taking part. His grudge was with SapphireClan and SapphireClan alone.

"Stop!" she yelled again. "We are leaving! Before a fight breaks out on this sacred night." She leaped off the rock and swept her tail, gathering her clanmates around her. They surged up and over the lip of the Ravine and back into their territory.

"SapphireClan, let's go," Tawnystar commanded. They backed up reluctantly.

"This doesn't mean you've won," Kestrelfur hissed. "It just means you'd all better watch your backs."

"Watch yours," Snowblaze challenged back. "I'll defeat you a second time if you'd like." Starnose stepped in front of the angered tom and pushed him back to avoid the fight. He unwillingly took a step back as he was pushed back to his clanmates.

SapphireClan and EmeraldClan cats both climbedout of the Ravine, casting goading looks at each other. News about Emberbreezewas completely forgotten as a fight almost broke out that night. No one wasready to back down, but clearly StarClan was not happy with the two clans.

Chapter 20

"Snowblaze! Bring those brambles over here!" Littletail called from behind the nursery. Snowblaze didn't answer, but dragged the large tangle of brambles he was carrying over to where Littletail was patching the nursery. Snowblaze was relieved to have the spikey plant out of his mouth. His tongue prodded at a spot on the roof of his mouth where a thorn had dug in. But as he looked around the gully he was relieved to see it looking much better. Every day Snowblaze and his clanmates had worked tirelessly to rebuild what had been destroyed. Even through the stormy days that had followed the fire.

It was hard for him and his clanmates, most of them still had trouble breathing, and because of that, the rebuilding had started out slow. Snaketail seemed to be the worst, his breath rattling every time he coughed. And Stiffwhisker had passed away soon after they moved back to camp; her old lungs couldn't handle the extra pressure of breathing in the smoke. They had mourned her passing and her two denmates had buried her. Swiftear had taken it very hard and he hadn't left the elders' den since that day.

Blinking his thoughts back to the present, Snowblaze watched Littletail maneuver the brambles into place behind the nursery and weave the stems into the camp wall. Their camp wall once stood tall and intimidating, but now it was a patchwork of sticks and thorns woven together in an attempt to recreate the gully's surrounding protection.

The nursery was almost completed and back to looking like a place no enemy would want to try and penetrate. It was a good thing too because it meant that Lizardbelly and Sparklekit could move back into the nursery. The queen had been sleeping close to Charfur every night in the elder's den and she never took her eyes off of her remaining kit. Snowblaze felt sad for Lizardbelly every time her saw her; losing Shrewkit took something away from her that he was afraid she'd never get back.

The warriors' den was coming along more gradually. The leaves of the hawthorn bush were growing back slowly which helped to fill in the drafty gaps. The warriors would be grateful of that once the weather began to turn cold. The Great Maple, however, would always bear the scars of the fire. It stood tall, one side blackened by fire.

"Hey! Snowblaze, are you day dreaming?" The voice pulled him out of his thoughts once more and his eyes focused on Flameclaw. The ginger deputy looked tired. He had been working as hard as any warrior to mend their camp. "Moonbeam needs some more herbs gathered. You can bring Leafpaw with you to help. Be back before sunset."

"I can do that," he answered and made his way over to the medicine cats' den to find out which herbs Moonbeam needed. Snowblaze's whiskers drooped in exhaustion, but he had to keep helping. He knew that what his sister had done had nothing to do with him, but he felt that he had something to prove now. He felt he needed to do everything anyone asked of him; he was afraid that some clanmates would be distrustful of him now.

As he passed the fresh kill pile he sighed at how small it still was. The fire had driven away so much prey, that most cats were going to sleep hungry. Just the thought of it made his stomach ache. It growled loudly and he tried to ignore it. He would have to try hunting again later.

"Oh thank you Snowblaze I'm glad you're here," Moonbeam spoke breathlessly as the tom entered the gloomy den. The medicine cat seemed scatter-brained as he turned in circles trying to figure out what he needed. He muttered to himself, and Snowblaze just waited patiently.

"Coltsfoot!" he burst out suddenly. "And more goldenrod, maybe some ragwort..." Suddenly Moonbeam stopped and looked at Snowblaze with his deep blue eyes. "We never got a chance to speak really since the fire. Are you doing okay?" he asked kindly.

Snowblaze was taken aback slightly. No one had really asked him, except for his mate Mistshade who asked him every day. "Yeah I

guess I'm alright," he answered. "As good as anyone else."

"Snowblaze, you went through something completely different than the rest of us. It must have affected you somehow. I'm here to listen."

Having someone offer to listen was actually kind of a relief and Snowblaze felt a weight lift off his shoulders. But at the same time, he didn't know what to say. Snowblaze had pretty much come to terms with his littermate's exile. There was nothing he could do about it now. He sat with a *thump* and dust floated up around him. It danced on slanting sun rays and for a moment he was lost in their gentle disposition.

"It's okay if you don't want to talk too. There's no extra pressure on you, you know. Just because of what Emberbreeze did, doesn't mean you need to prove anything to your clanmates. They all still trust you to make the right decisions." Moonbeam waved his tail and began pulling out some herbs. "You did save Sleetstar from her after all." Snowblaze just sat wide-eyed at the way Moonbeam knew exactly what he was thinking.

How...?

"Now this is coltsfoot," the silver tom pushed forward a small plant with bright yellow flowers. "We need lots of this. It grows near the Rocky Hills. The rest, I'll get Cloudwhisker to fetch when she gets back."

"Okay Moonbeam," Snowblaze responded. He tried his best to commit the herb to memory. He wanted to thank the medicine cat for reassuring him about his place in the clan, but he didn't know what to say. Instead he hurriedly dipped his head and backed out of the den to find Leafpaw.

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The sun dappled Snowblaze's pelt warmly as he wove his way through the undergrowth. The sun was high in the late green leaf sky. It was an unusually warm day and Snowblaze had taken it upon himself to hunt for the clan. Beside him Mistshade kept pace

and glanced over lovingly at him. Snowblaze's heart warmed him more than the sun.

They carried their small catch home, not speaking because their mouths were full, but every twist and turn they brushed pelts. Electricity sparked between them and Snowblaze found it hard to concentrate on the path ahead of him. Actually, he found it hard to concentrate on much of anything when Mistshade was beside him. But he couldn't imagine doing anything without her.

She pushed on ahead and he watched how her haunches swayed as she walked, and the way her tail wove through the air. Her silvery grey fur rippled over her muscles and her ears twitched as she unintentionally listened to the sounds around her. He was smitten.

Not paying attention to where he placed his paws, he stepped into a mouse hole, just big enough to twist his paw. Dropping his catch he exclaimed in pain.

"Ouch! Mouse dung..." he hissed in air as he shook out his paw. Mistshade stopped and turned to see the embarrassing sight. She purred in laughter, but placed her fresh kill beside his and came over to look at his paw.

"Were you not paying attention again?" she asked in a chiding way.

"So?" he replied grumpily. "I can't help it, I can't pay much attention to anything when you're around."

She looked up through her lashes and blinked slowly. "I know what you mean." She licked his paw slowly and soothingly. "I can't think properly, and I've missed more prey recently than I care to admit."

"We're just a bunch of clumsy cats aren't we? You can't hunt properly and I can't even walk properly!" He laughed off the embarrassment and tested putting weight on his paw. It stung, but it wasn't so bad that he couldn't walk home.

"You can lean on me if you need to," Mistshade said. He nodded gratefully and they both grasped their prey in their jaws and headed back to camp.

The sun was sinking towards the horizon when they stepped in and placed their fresh kill on the pile. Snowblaze chose a small rabbit for him and Mistshade to share. He brought it over to where she had picked out a spot to eat.

Just as he was about to tuck in, Sleetstar came walking up. Snowblaze noticed he seemed jumpy; his tail flicked and his eyes darted form side to side. Snowblaze cocked his head as he waited for his leader to speak.

"I need you and Littletail to come with me and Moonbeam tonight to the Star Cave. I need warriors to protect me," he said quickly and quietly. Snowblaze didn't know why he looked so skittish, but he had seemed out of sorts lately. *Ever since the last gathering when Tawnystar had threatened him*, Snowblaze noticed and slightly narrowed his eyes.

"Moonbeam insisted that I asked for the two of you," Sleetstar meowed quickly, and almost suspiciously.

"Sure, Sleetstar. I'll let Littletail know." Sleetstar looked at Snowblaze, narrowed his eyes, and nodded. He quickly retreated to the safety of his den in the Great Maple.

"What's up with him lately?" Mistshade asked curiously. "I never see him anymore, it seems like he never leaves his den."

Snowblaze had no idea. But it was true; Flameclaw had taken over most of the duties, apart from calling clan meetings. Snowblaze wondered if that had anything to do with why he wanted to go to the Star Cave tonight.

Surely Tawnystar hadn't gotten under his skin. What could be bothering him so much that he needs to speak with StarClan?

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The sun had set, leaving the sky with streaks of pink and orange. Snowblaze admired the beautiful sky and hoped the weather would be nice tomorrow. They had to finish the warriors' den soon.

"You'll be careful tonight?" Mistshade asked in a concerned voice

from beside him. They had settled down at the edge of the clearing to share tongues.

"Yes of course," he responded a little distracted. His mind had been wandering trying to imagine what had their leader so jumpy.

"You'll be crossing over RubyClan territory. They were awfully passive and quiet at the gathering. Who knows what they're thinking. And their territory was burned by the fire too, they could be hungry and quick to anger..."

Her voice faded into the background as Snowblaze watched Sleetstar scramble down the Great Maple and quickly into Moonbeam's den. His blue eyes were alight with worry.

"Snowblaze," Mistshade said finally. "Look at me."

He turned and locked his amber eyes with her light blue. They sparkled brilliantly in the last of the evening light. She leaned in and touched her nose to his, her sweet breath wreathing around his head.

"Please be careful. I want you to come home safe."

"Mistshade, I could never leave you. Not in a million moons. I'll be safe," he promised. He licked her cheek gently and lovingly and stood to find Littletail. He was sharing a squirrel with Lizardbelly and Badgerclaw.

"Hey Snowblaze," he said with a mouthful of squirrel. Littletail swallowed and licked his jowls. Cleaning his whiskers he added, "are we leaving now?"

"I think we're leaving soon. I saw Sleetstar talking with Moonbeam just a heartbeat ago." Snowblaze sat next to the group and laid his tail over his paws. His ears were pricked as he tried to peer into the medicine cat's den. The three cats continued to talk amongst each other quietly. But Snowblaze could make out that they were whispering about Sleetstar and how he had been acting lately. *His distrustful attitude hasn't gone unnoticed.*

Finally Sleetstar emerged from the roots of the Great Maple with

Moonbeam on his heels. He spotted Snowblaze and Littletail and made a beeline towards the two warriors. Snowblaze stood abruptly and Littletail joined him more slowly.

"We're going right now," Sleetstar said in a hurry. "Come on."

Snowblaze had trouble keeping up with their paranoid leader. He puffed, not used to running so quickly. Moonbeam was just behind his leader, clearly keeping an eye on him. He had a concerned set to his shoulders and his gaze never left Sleetstar.

Littletail was huffing along behind Snowblaze, his little legs trying in vain to keep up. "Why is he in such a hurry?" he asked out of breath.

"I don't know," Snowblaze looked back at him sympathetically. He dropped back to keep pace with the older warrior.

"Have you noticed how weird he's been lately?" Littletail asked quietly, clearly not wanting either cat up ahead to hear him.

"Yeah," Snowblaze muttered. "He's been so jittery lately. But no one seems to know what happened to make him like this. But I've noticed he's been like this since the last gathering."

Littletail grunted in agreement. "Do you think it's true, what Emberbreeze said? About him being on his last life?"

"I really don't know. But Moonbeam seemed surprised by it. He hasn't mentioned anything since," he said with certainty. Before Snowblaze could continue, Sleetstar interrupted them.

"Hurry up! We're entering RubyClan territory." He growled menacingly. Or maybe in a frightened way, Snowblaze couldn't tell.

The group slowed as they crossed the scent markers, everyone's ears pricked and gazes looking around for any patrols. The sun had set now, but there could always be enemy cats around. Sleetstar's fur was on end, and even though he was in a hurry, he stayed as close as he could to the group.

"You, watch behind us," he said briskly to Littletail. "And you," he

snapped at Snowblaze, "watch our flanks. We can't have anyone sneaking up on us. These flea ridden excuses for cats would do exactly that."

Moonbeam whispered words into their leader's ear, trying to sooth his nerves. Snowblaze ignored his commanding tone and pricked his ears to listen to the forest around them. As he looked around he noticed that the fire hadn't touched their territory as bad as he had originally thought.

Trees were charred, but whole. Bushes and shrubs were nothing but a tangle of branches, all their leaves slowly growing back. It reminded Snowblaze of his own home, but the devastation here seemed to be less significant, as if the fire didn't reach too far into their territory.

Snowblaze opened his jaws to taste the air when Littletail whispered loudly, "a RubyClan patrol is coming!"

The four of them halted as Thunderpelt, Morningfrost, and Birdfeather stepped around a scraggly bush and confronted them. Sleetstar's fur began to bristle, but Moonbeam stepped up and covered their ragged leader with his broad shoulders.

"What are you doing here?" Thunderpelt asked authoritatively. "You know you are well out of your territory."

Morningfrost hissed as she stepped forward threateningly. Her eyes were narrowed and her claws were out, ready to shred fur as soon as someone made a move.

"Tawnystar was right," she jeered. "They're so weak that they can't even feed themselves. They're here to steal our prey!" Her tail lashed furiously. Snowblaze noticed Birdfeather stood back, worry in her eyes.

His scruff began to lift, but Moonbeam spoke in a quite and calm voice. "We are travelling to the Star Cave," he explained. "You hardly expect a medicine cat to be on a hunting patrol," he said scathingly to Morningfrost. She just spat on the ground in response.

"I see," Thunderpelt said thoughtfully. He paused and motioned for Morningfrost to back down. "You are allowed to pass to share tongues with StarClan." He conceded and backed up a pace to allow the group to proceed.

"We will be watching for your safe return home," he added threateningly as they passed. Snowblaze couldn't help but shiver. Thunderpelt was a fair warrior, but he was easily the biggest among all three clans. His reputation was intense and Snowblaze didn't want to find out what he could do in battle. He scooted forward quickly to keep up with his clanmates.

They scrambled down the side of the Ravine and dislodged pebbles in their haste. Now Moonbeam took the lead and guided them to the Star Cave. He paused outside the entrance and Sleetstar looked around wildly.

"No one followed us?" he asked frantically.

"No Sleetstar, we are alone," Moonbeam soothed. He looked over at Snowblaze and Littletail who were standing a little distance away, unsure of whether or not they were allowed to follow into the cave.

Snowblaze pricked his ears in hope, but Moonbeam shook his head slightly. Snowblaze sighed, crestfallen. He wasn't sure if he'd ever see the inside of the cave.

"You two stay out here and keep guard of the cave entrance," Moonbeam instructed. "Let no one else in after us."

"Sure thing!" Littletail said cheerfully. He sat with a thump, his constantly plump body bulging over his feet. Snowblaze rolled his eyes playfully at the sight. He could never understand how he stayed like that, somehow even through leaf bare!

Sleetstar hurried Moonbeam into the cave. Snowblaze settled down beside him on the opposite end of the hole in the rock and looked out over the Ravine. He sighed and looked up at the night sky; it was rapidly getting darker, the stars were spilled across the sky and the moon was just a claw scratch.

"It's weird being here alone," Littletail commented. His voice seemed loud in the stillness of the air. Snowblaze murmured in agreement, but he suddenly felt nervous. Littletail's comment made him think about if they were really alone or not. After all, RubyClan knew they were here.

After what seemed like ages sitting there in the cold and getting stiff, Snowblaze heard rapid paws steps echoing from behind him. He didn't even have time to turn around before Sleetstar was bustling through the cave entrance and hurrying up the Ravine wall.

"Come on you two, hurry!" Moonbeam called to the two startled cats as he followed Sleetstar. Snowblaze and Littletail leaped up, ready for another run through the trees.

As they ran around rocks and bushes, Snowblaze over heard Sleetstar whispering frantically from up ahead. Moonbeam was trying to calm him down, and Snowblaze had only caught snippets of what was said.

It sounded like he's afraid of someone coming after him. He thought to himself. *But who would want to?*

They entered their territory quickly and unchallenged, and as they stepped into camp Sleetstar leaped up into the safety of the Great Maple. Snowblaze looked up after him confused.

"Is everything okay?" Snowblaze asked Moonbeam quietly. He was worried that StarClan had shown him some sort of omen. With the way he was acting, he couldn't see how it would be anything else.

Moonbeam took a moment to answer. The silence stretched, until he finally spoke carefully.

"Sleetstar isn't well. He thinks that something bad is going to happen to him." Snowblaze tilted his head in confusion. "After what... after what Emberbreeze did, I think he was shook to his core. He's paranoid." Moonbeam looked after him worriedly.

"I won't say anything," Snowblaze assured. Hedidn't want to have

the knowledge that their trusted and strong leader was weakand scared. He couldn't imagine what would happen if the whole clan knew. So hestayed silent and crawled carefully into the warriors' den to sleep.

Chapter 21

Crisp leaves swirled to the ground around Snowblaze's paws as a brisk wind blew through the trees. They were staring to change colour ever so slightly. Another leaf fall was just around the corner.

Dens had finished being built and his clanmates were finally feeling safe again, all except Sleetstar. Who had seemed to become worse and worse as they days wore on. EmeraldClan rarely saw the grey and white speckled cat now. He wouldn't even leave his nest to eat.

The burden of his knowledge about their leader weighed heavily on Snowblaze's mind as he stood in the morning sunlight. Flowertail had led the dawn patrol with Starnose, Eaglepaw, and Charfur.

Flameclaw shuffled tiredly out of the warriors' den and began to groom his sleepy fur. He had seemed exhausted lately, having to do the duties of both the deputy and the leader. Snowblaze padded over and sat down beside Flameclaw.

"I'll lead a hunting patrol today if you want. It'll be good to get the fresh kill pile as full as we can to prepare for leaf bare," he said sensibly.

Flameclaw looked up at him gratefully and meowed his thanks. Snowblaze nodded and crawled back into the warriors' den to find cats to come with him. Oneclaw was stirring and Rainwhisker was awake, washing his face.

"Do you two want to come hunting with me?" he asked hopefully. Oneclaw nodded and stretched, letting out a huge yawn.

"Sure," Rainwhisker replied.

The three of them left the camp as it was still waking up and headed out into the forest. The chilly morning air woke Snowblaze up from his morning daze and he broke into a brisk trot to warm up. Oneclaw and Rainwhisker followed behind.

They made it to the edge of their territory on the border with the meadow. It was the area that had seen the least amount of damage. Oneclaw decided to try his luck hunting in the tall grasses of the meadow, while Snowblaze and Rainwhisker padded along under the trees.

The brown and white tom scented the air. Snowblaze pricked his ears and looked around. Birds were chirping in the trees and far away a crow cawed. He enjoyed hunting with Rainwhisker. The older tom was always calm and sensible. He was funny too at the best of times and Snowblaze enjoyed his company.

"I always feel like I need to bring back more prey now," Rainwhisker commented out of the blue.

"What do you mean?" Snowblaze asked. He looked sideways at his friend.

"Well with Meltwater expecting kits, I feel like it's my responsibility to bring back enough prey to feed her and my kits." He sighed dramatically and sat with a huff. "I don't know if I'm even ready to be a father yet."

Snowblaze sat beside him and laid his tail comfortingly over his shoulders. "I think you're ready, Rainwhisker. You two have been in love for a long time and I really do think you'll both be great parents." Rainwhisker looked at him appreciatively. "And as for prey," Snowblaze added, "I'll help you out!"

"Thanks Snowblaze," Rainwhisker said relieved. He stood and shook out his fur. "Let's get going then, we've got bellies to feed."

After catching a mouse each and Rainwhisker catching an impressively large pigeon, they headed back to the gully. Oneclaw caught up dragging a partridge by its wing. Feathers were splayed around his face in a comical way and Snowblaze tried not to laugh at his serious expression.

Snowblaze could hear cats meowing loudly and worriedly before he even entered the camp. He looked over at Rainwhisker and they hurried forward to see what was going on.

The elders were crouched together just outside of their den, heads bent in what seemed like grief. Everyone was out and fur was fluffed in agitation. Robintalon and Badgerclaw were pacing back and forth.

"What happened?" Snowblaze asked Specklepelt, who was nearby. She looked over at him, eyes narrowed, but suddenly her features softened. She just looked defeated, and that unnerved Snowblaze.

"Sleetstar," she began quietly. "Sleetstar is dead."

Snowblaze stood rigid in shock. Rainwhisker dropped the fresh kill to the ground, his mouth wide in disbelief.

"What?" he exclaimed loudly. Specklepelt nodded and turned to pad slowly to her mate. She tucked her head under his chin comfortingly. It was weird to see such a gentle gesture coming from such an ill-tempered cat.

Snowblaze walked slowly into the throng of cats. The elders were shaking their heads and muttering quietly to each other. Flowertail and Starnose were crouched together in shocked silence. Lizardbelly wailed loudly and Charfur tried to comfort her. Littletail said nothing as he stared unseeing into the distance.

Snowblaze could understand what Lizardbelly and Littletail were feeling. He knew what it felt like to lose kin. He approached them slowly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry for your loss. We're all here for you." Lizardbelly sobbed loudly and Littletail didn't even let show that he heard. Snowblaze nodded to Charfur and left them to grieve.

He found Mistshade sitting off to the edge of the clearing with Meltwater, Leafpaw and Eaglepaw. He made his way over and sat next to them. Mistshade looked at him sadly and nuzzled her head under his chin. The two apprentices were staring, confused and sad. Snowblaze brimmed with sympathy for the little cats, but they would deal with much more death the older they got.

"So Sleetstar is gone forever?" Leafpaw asked Meltwater. The blue-grey she-cat nodded and swept the young cat closer with her tail. She scooted over and sat next to Meltwater.

"He won't be coming back anymore, he will watch over us all from StarClan," she explained.

"Who will be our leader now?" Eaglepaw asked innocently. "Will it be Flameclaw?"

"Yes," she nodded. "He will most likely go to the Star Cave tonight to receive his nine lives."

"I want to be leader one day," Leafpaw said wistfully.

Her littermate looked over in a concerned way. "It's me who's going to be leader!" Meltwater cuffed him over the ear. "What was that for?" he mewed indignantly.

"Now is not the time to be talking about this," she said looking around the camp at all of their devastated clanmates. "You need to learn to be tactful about what you say."

"Sorry Meltwater," he grumbled. Snowblaze purred in amusement and Mistshade was watching through slitted eyes. "Kits," she murmured quietly. "They never think before they speak."

"I'm sure we were all like that at that age," Snowblaze responded still amused.

After Flameclaw, Oneclaw, and Moonbeam helped manoeuvre Sleetstar's body out of his nest and into the clearing, one by one cats went to share tongues for the last time and whisper words of comfort. His body lie there stiffly, not even a slight breeze to ruffle his pelt. Snowblaze hated the way their tradition was to make them looks like they were sleeping peacefully. He hated it ever since they made their parents look that way. It's as if the clan cats were trying to pretend these cats weren't deceased. But it was always so painfully obvious.

Nonetheless, Snowblaze took his turn and buried his nose in their leader's cold fur. Grief took over his body in a wave and he took a

moment to steady his legs before speaking to him quietly.

"You were a strong, kind, and fair leader. I know a lot happened at the end... May StarClan light your path, Sleetstar," he murmured in a quiet and personal way.

He found Cloudwhisker laying half in and half out of her den and he padded over. He sat next to her, wondering if he should ask what had happened. Everyone else seemed preoccupied with their thoughts.

"Hello Snowblaze," she greeted him. "All of this is a bit morbid, don't you think? Laying him out for cats to send him off to StarClan. Probably reconciling their own thoughts." Snowblaze was taken aback by her directness, but mumbled in agreement. He did think it was a bit morbid.

When I die, I just want to be buried quickly and painlessly, he thought to himself. They both sat for a time and just watched as the day wore on and as cats came and went. Lizardbelly, Littletail, Whitemoss, and Flameclaw all stayed by his side.

"What happened to him?" Snowblaze asked after some time. Cloudwhisker looked up at him with her clear green eyes. Her gaze was intense and focused and Snowblaze almost looked away.

"He was found in his nest by Flameclaw. Most think it was old age, and I'll let them all go on believing it. But I think he was strangled," she said ominously. Snowblaze felt a chill run through his veins.

"Strangled...? By who?" he asked as he tried to think. He couldn't imagine any single cat in this clan could do such a thing. They all knew he was slowly losing his mind, but not even Snaketail would dare to break the warrior code in that way. Cloudwhisker stayed silent and after a while, Snowblaze dipped his head to her and walked away.

His thoughts reeled; he couldn't place a paw on who would have done such a thing, unless Cloudwhisker's imagination was running rampant. *Which could be a possibility,* he thought dryly.

The sun was setting now and the elders were getting ready to take Sleetstar's body away before the last light left the sky. Oneclaw helped haul him onto their backs and he walked out with them.

Snowblaze stifled a yawn. It had been a long stagnant day, with only the dawn patrol and one hunting patrol early in the morning before everyone found out about Sleetstar's death.

He pondered going hunting for a moment, but it would be dark soon and too much had happened. He would go out tomorrow. He found Mistshade talking quietly with Rainwhisker, Robintalon, and Meltwater. He noticed that Meltwater was starting to look round and plump with the kits in her belly. He came over and sat next to them; they greeted him quietly.

"Who do you think the next deputy will be?" Robintalon asked the group. Snowblaze hadn't even thought about that yet. He wanted to be deputy, but he still had lots to learn, he admitted to himself. And he hadn't had an apprentice yet.

"I think Oneclaw deserves it," Rainwhisker said thoughtfully. "He's always got a level head."

"But I think he might retire soon," Robintalon added. Snowblaze thought and realized that his muzzle was already pretty grey. It seemed sad, in a way, to lose such a strong warrior to age.

"What about Starnose?" Mistshade asked with a shrug. "I think she might be good, maybe a little timid though."

"I'd say Badgerclaw if he weren't so caught up in Flowertail all the time," Meltwater added amusingly. As she spoke Snowblaze noticed them slip into the warriors' den together.

They really do not leave each other's sides, Snowblaze thought. He remembered wistfully when him and Flowertail used to be good friends. But now she spent all her time with Badgerclaw, effectively cutting themselves off from most other cats. Snowblaze was sad for a moment, but shook it off as he sat happily beside his mate and new friends.

At that moment Flameclaw leaped up onto the Great Maple and called out into the clear evening air.

"Let all cats join together beneath the Great Maple for a clan meeting!"

They all slowly emerged from the shadows surrounding the clearing and sat together underneath the large branch that swept over the camp. Snowblaze thought he looked fitting up there, his fiery pelt glowing in the moonlight.

"Tonight I will be going to the Star Cave to receive my nine lives," he spoke out. The cats below nodded their agreement. He was fit to be a good leader, and they all supported him, Snowblaze included.

"I will leave Oneclaw in charge while I'm gone." He nodded to the senior warrior. Then he took a deep breath and said more quietly, "wish me luck."

Then Flameclaw leaped down from the large tree branch and landed with grace. He motioned for Moonbeam to follow and they left together into the night. Snowblaze yawned again and decided it was time to sleep.

Mistshade stood beside him and angled her ears towards the warriors' den in question. Snowblaze nodded and they walked together to their nests. Snowblaze settled down in the comfortable nest made of moss and bracken.

There was something else soft touching his nose and he sniffed, smelling a familiar scent. He sat up with a jolt and realized there was a tuft of white fur caught in his nest. He quickly buried it deep and covered it with his body. Snowblaze's eyes were wide in surprise and what he thought was fear.

The fur belonged to Emberbreeze.

His mind whirled with incoherent thoughts.

But how? And when? Her scent is fresh, within the day at least. How could she have come back without anyone noticing? Did she...? Did she kill Sleetstar?

Suddenly his thoughts clicked together. If she had been here then, without a doubt, she was the one who killed Sleetstar. Cloudwhisker was right!

"Are you okay Snowblaze?" Mistshade asked, lifting her head drowsily. He slowed his breath and tried to calm his nerves.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "Just a thorn in my nest." He couldn't feel bad about lying because what he had just discovered was too important. He tried to settle into his nest once again.

But how could her fur have gotten caught in my nest? Did she want me to know it was her? This must have been some sort of justice for her, I suppose. Maybe she needed to prove herself to me, or apologize...

His anxious thoughts slowly drifted him to sleep. He awoke and opened his groggy eyes. It was still dark; the sun wasn't even up yet. The moon bathed a silver light on the den and he closed his eyes to go back to sleep. But a paw prodded him in the side gently.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," the voice said softly. Snowblaze jerked his head up, recognizing the voice.

The silver light wasn't the moon, it was his mother sitting beside his nest. Her fur was washed in starlight, and Snowblaze thought she never looked so beautiful. Waves of emotion washed over the tom and he couldn't speak. She nuzzled the top of his head softly, and he felt like a kit in the nursery again.

"Snowblaze, I'm here to tell you not to worry about Emberbreeze anymore."

"Is she dead?" he asked sharply.

"No dear. But what's done is done. Her mind is at ease now. She will find some sort of peace away from clan life and she won't come back anymore."

"So she did kill Sleetstar," Snowblaze said with a yawn. The starry cat did not answer his question, but he took her silence as an affirmation. He stretched his paws and settled back into his nest.

Yellowleaf pressed her nose into his head. It felt cold, but it spread warmth through his body. His mind was at rest and he drifted into the best sleep he had had in ages.

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"Let all cats join together beneath the Great Maple for a clan meeting!"

Flameclaw's voice rang out across the camp. Snowblaze woke with a start. Mistshade was stirring beside him. She had brought her nest closer in the night because she was curled up and pressed into his side. He looked down at her with a soft expression of love on his face.

He nuzzled her awake and she looked up at him. He loved the way her eyes blinked sleepily when she awoke, and feelings stirred deep inside his heart.

They padded out into the dawn light together, following the rest of their clanmates into the chilly morning air. Snowblaze's breath rose in billows of steam as he tried to warm his nose. The stars were still twinkling faintly above. The sun had barely touched the sky as it slowly turned the hills orange where it would rise.

Everyone sat close together, and of course Swiftear was grumbling about the cold. He always grumbled. Lizardbelly was sitting with her head drooping. Charfur sat next to her and pressed into her side in comfort. Sparklekit was looking up at her mother with concern. She was still too young to entirely understand what had happened. Snowblaze felt sorry for Lizardbelly; first she had lost one of her kits and soon after she lost her brother.

The apprentices walked quickly from their den and they both sat next to Starnose. Now Eaglepaw's mentor was their leader. *He must feel special,* Snowblaze thought. He remembered wishing that Flamecalw could be his mentor all those moons ago.

Once everyone was gathered he began.

"I have received my nine lives and have been blessed by StarClan."

"Flamestar! Flamestar! Flamestar!" His clanmates called his new name out into the morning air, mist rising from their breath, making the scene seem ethereal. Snowblaze was proud of Flamestar; he had worked so hard in the last days of Sleetstar's life. He deserved to be leader, and Snowblaze trusted that he would be a good one.

Pride shone from Flamestar's eyes as he looked down upon his clan. He sat tall and proud. Snowblaze could only imagine what it felt like to sit up there and gaze down upon cats that trusted him so deeply. He longed for such a feeling.

"Now I need a deputy to aid me as I lead EmeraldClan! I say these words before the warriors of StarClan so that they may hear and approve of my choice."

Everyone leaned forward in anticipation to hear which cat would be chosen.

"The new deputy of EmeraldClan will be Charfur."

Cheers rang out and everyone called his name. He was a popular choice, but obviously he wasn't expecting it considering the surprised look on his face. Cats went up and congratulated him, but Snowblaze hung back until everyone was settled.

"Now. Leaf bare is on its way and we need to get ready. I have some big paws to fill, but with your support we can do this. We can get through leaf bare and any problem we find."

"Flamestar! Flamestar!" every cat yowled again.

As the gathering broke up, Snowblaze made his way over to Charfur. He was so proud of his old mentor, emotion threatened to well up in his eyes.

"Charfur," he greeted him and dipped his head respectfully.

"No need for that Snowblaze, nothing's changed," he responded to the show of respect good-naturedly.

"Everything's changed. But maybe for the better," Snowblaze said.

Since his mother had visited him in his dreams he had felt some sort of closure. Charfur murmured in agreement. They stood quietly for a moment.

"I know a lot has happened and definitely not all of it was good," Snowblaze began. "But I'm really glad I had you to teach me along the way. After my parents died, I think you became a father to me in a way. I just want to say thank you and that I'm really proud you're our new deputy. You're going to be amazing."

Charfur looked away hiding his eyes. He shook out his pelt and turned to look back on the cat he had helped raise. He looked proudly at Snowblaze and touched his nose to his ear.

"Thank you Snowblaze, that means a lot to me," he said softly. Looking forward and squaring his shoulders he said, " we've come this far. We can do anything together. I'm proud to be this clan's new deputy."

Snowblaze admired his old mentor. Feeling moreoptimistic than he had in a long time, he looked forward to the future ofEmeraldClan. With a new leader and a new deputy, this clan would thrive.